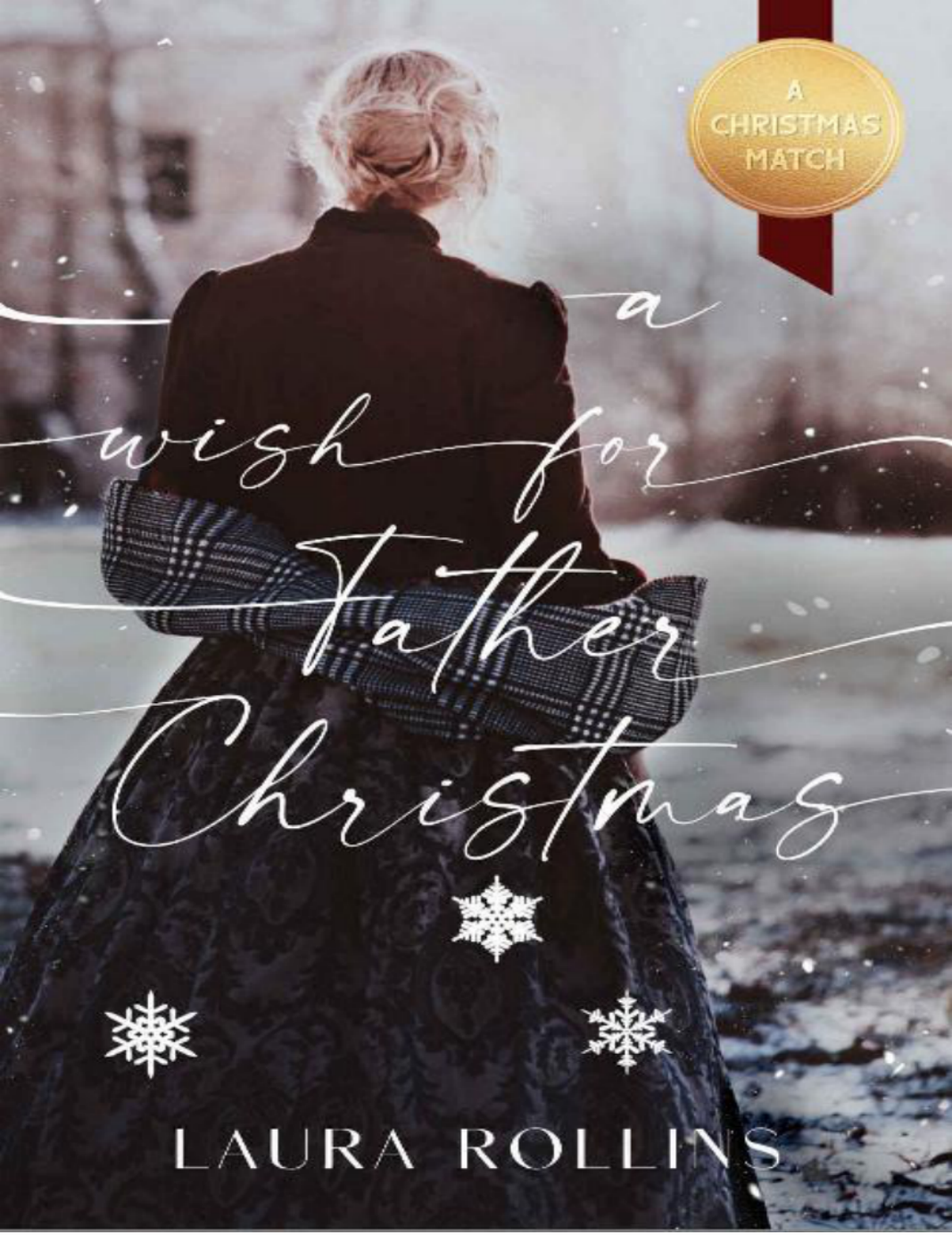

A CHRISTMAS MATCH
a wish for Father Christmas
LAURA ROLLINS

a wish for Father Christmas

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a wish for Father Christmas

LAURA ROLLINS

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For Andrea and Damon,
Sundays are always better with you.

Dear Amelie

Cresthearth Manor, Carlaby
November 10th, 1815

My dearest friend, I have stumbled upon the most delicious notion. I can barely write for being so excited. I have just had a letter from my niece's son; he and two friends wish to come and stay with me for a couple of weeks early in December. I was sitting by the fire, the first snowfall of the season covering the ground outside, when his letter arrived. Such providential timing it was, for I had been wailing rather egregiously in self-pity over our annual Christmas gathering needing to be abandoned this year. Perhaps next year weather and health will permit us to all meet once more.

Until then, however, allow me to tell you about my great-nephew, Lord Brooks. He inherited at a young age due to his parents' untimely death. His lands and estates have done nothing but struggle ever since. Then, earlier this year, I learned that he has determined to find and marry a woman possessing of a large dowry.

Are you not utterly diverted? I was. More still, I was wholly appalled. I never thought the dear boy would grow so boorish as to set his mind to making a loveless match. Perhaps he has been too long without a mother's attention.

Ever since my sweet husband passed ten years ago, I must confess, I have known more loneliness and solitude than I would ever wish on anyone. Since he gave me nearly thirty years of marital bliss, I try not to hold his early departure from this earth against him too much. Still, the thought of my nephew choosing such loneliness for a lifetime . . . it makes my heart ache.

And now, I finally come back around to the notion I spoke of earlier.

I have determined to help Lord Brooks find not only a wife, but to find *love*.

Am I wrong in believing I can help my nephew?

I feel if I cannot enjoy your pleasing company and the company of our dear friends this winter, I must do something else with my time. What could possibly be better than to spend this Christmas helping another find love? It will be my way of celebrating the love we share one with another, and a way of honoring my sweet, departed husband.

If you believe it is unwise for me to set myself up as matchmaker, please write to me immediately and convince me to change my ways. I am writing to Euota, Temperence, and Esther as well. If you are unable to make me see reason, perhaps they shall succeed.

Until either you or they do, I fear I am already lost in my own scheme. I cannot help it. And I have the most perfect woman in mind. Soft-spoken, polite, embroiders most elegantly, and comes from a respectable family. I shall have to see her and my nephew together at least once before I know for sure, but I believe they will make a lovely pair.

No matter your thoughts on my plan, please do write me back. The colder the weather turns, the more desperate I am to share the closeness we have enjoyed these many years. If you do, I promise to write you often and keep you agog with all the delightful *on-dits* of my venture.

Until then, I remain always your friend,

Margarette Fudge

Chapter 1



ALICE GRANT, Countess Nightingale, had never been particularly vain regarding her auburn hair. Still, her shoulders were tight, her eyes nearly squeezed shut as Mrs. Clarke stood behind her, scissors poised to cut off the first few locks.

"Are you certain, my lady?"

As much as Alice wished she could keep her hair, she was rather more fond of her safety—and the safety of her son—than her looks. For that reason, the hair had to go.

"Just do it," she said, shutting her eyes completely.

The *shrip* of scissors cutting hair sent an uncomfortable tingle up her spine. Another cut, and Alice didn't open her eyes. A third, and this time the curl recently detached from her head bounced against her back before hitting the floor.

Alice scrunched up her face but otherwise tried to hold as still as possible. The end result was going to be hard enough to face; she didn't need to make it worse by wiggling in her seat so that her housekeeper couldn't do a fine job of it.

"There," Mrs. Clarke said after only a few minutes. "That's the worst of it. Just let me even up the ends a bit."

Alice hazarded a glance, opening a single eye no more than a sliver. She could only see a blurry reflection in the mirror. Drawing in a breath—while also being careful not to move and ruin Mrs. Clarke's work—Alice opened both eyes and truly looked at herself.

All her beautiful hair. *Gone.*

Or at the very least, most of it. Where before she'd had long auburn locks falling about her shoulders, now a red frizz framed her face. She scowled at her reflection. How could it be that the very color of her hair looked different now that it had been cut short? It made her dozens of freckles stand out far more blatantly as well.

Mrs. Clarke took hold of Alice's head and turned it to the right. Alice held the new position as her housekeeper snipped the hair about her ear and then angled Alice's head the other direction so she might do the same on the left side. Mrs. Clark left Alice's hair long enough to cover the tips of her ears and create the windswept look on top that was all the rage among the gentlemen of the *ton* just now.

“There.” Mrs. Clarke angled Alice’s face forward once more. “All evened up. Pomade, if you please.” She held her hand out.

Alice reached across the dressing table and picked up the small jar she’d kept when her husband had passed away. She turned it over slightly between her fingers. Of all her late husband’s personal effects that she’d systematically gone through, what was it about this small jar that had caused her to keep it? Most of Lord Hoskins’s belongings she’d given away. Alice handed the small jar to Mrs. Clarke. Perhaps, somewhere deep inside her subconscious, she’d already begun formulating this plan well before it had come to the front of her mind and she’d decided to act on it.

Mrs. Clarke opened the jar, and the smell of wax with a hint of sandalwood wafted toward Alice. Instantly, she was transported back to a time of wordless dinners, evenings sitting on the settee while her husband sat on the opposite side of the room in a wingback, sleeping in her bedchamber forever alone.

Alice blinked and willed the memories to retreat into the past where they belonged.

“What do you think?” Mrs. Clarke asked.

Alice stared at her reflection. So caught up in remembering her past life, she’d not even felt Mrs. Clarke finger-comb the pomade through her hair. It was the perfect amount of height and casualness that so many men sought.

“I believe every gentleman shall envy my hair and demand to know the name of my barber.”

“Well, don’t send them my way,” Mrs. Clarke said emphatically, closing the jar once more.

Alice laughed slightly, turning back to her reflection. She angled her chin one way and then another. The change truly was remarkable. She reached for the thickly rimmed glasses Mr. Clarke had secured for her two days ago. He’d seen to it that flat glass was put in the frames so that they would help hide her identity without ruining her ability to see. She slipped them on, completing the transformation. That was, complete all except for her dress, but her new clothes were not yet ready.

“And the ingredients for the white paint? Have they arrived?” Alice asked, still taking in what she saw in the mirror.

“Just this morning, my lady.”

A bit of a disguise for when she was Lady Nightingale, and a bit of a disguise when she was Mr. Allen. The two would look nothing more alike than cousins. She was determined.

“I think this might just work,” Alice said to herself.

Mrs. Clarke shook her head. “It had better.” The elderly woman pursed her lips, her brow dropping, as did her voice. “Are you certain

you wish to go through with this? Just think of what will happen if you are found out."

Alice sat up straighter. "Think of what will happen if I don't." Alice could see Mrs. Clarke's uncertainty in her reflection through the mirror. She turned and faced her housekeeper fully. "You know as well as I do that men act one way among polite society and another way entirely when they are at home or among their associates." Her father and late husband had both proven as much. Her father, Mr. Grant, had been jovial and most charming among society. But at home, he was belittling and overbearing. Her late husband, Lord Hoskins, had been fashionably disinterested and much sought after for his wise insights among society. But at home, he was dismissive at first and, after she'd produced an heir, uninterested in her in the extreme.

"This is our best chance at happiness, for Joseph and for myself," Alice insisted. She turned back toward the mirror, surprised all over again at the reflection that met her. "After all, the only true way to get to know a man is to *become* one."

The door leading into Alice's bedchamber wobbled slightly, then the doorknob turned, and the door flung fully open. Joseph careened into the room heading straight for her, Ponto trailing directly after him.

"Mama! Mama!" He saw her and pulled up short. He blinked, then scowled. Ponto did the same, listing his small puppy head to the side, mimicking Joseph almost exactly.

Alice turned toward them both. "What do you think of my new hair style, sweetie?"

Joseph pursed his lips and shook his head. "It's ugly."

Alice laughed, but a part of her hurt at his honest assessment. He was right. As a woman, she looked far worse now than she had only an hour ago. But then she turned once more to Joseph. *He* was more the reason she was doing this than anything.

"Come here, my darling boy." She pulled him onto her lap. Ponto trotted up and sat beside her feet. "Now what was it you were so wanting to say to me?"

"Has my new papa come yet?"

Alice's heart ached at his sweet question—the single question he'd asked day in and day out over the past several weeks. Weakened by his persistence, she'd finally relented and, not realizing how much he'd take her statement to heart, Alice had said, "Perhaps Father Christmas will bring you a new papa."

Never had she regretted words so much. Joseph had instantly taken her word on the subject. In his young, five-year-old mind, it was as good as a solemn promise. He was getting a new papa this winter

holiday, and nothing could shake his belief. Blessedly, as tradition had it, Father Christmas sometimes came at the beginning of December, sometimes closer to the end, sometimes not until Epiphany. It wasn't much wiggle room, but Alice would take all she could get at this point.

"Not yet, Joseph," she said, stroking his hair.

He gave her a firm nod. "That's all right. Tomorrow's December first, so maybe Father Christmas will bring my new papa then."

Ponto barked his agreement.

"I doubt he'll come so early this year," Alice tried to warn her son. "I wouldn't count on him before Christmas Day at the earliest." Even that felt frightfully soon. She had a few connections in town—a few men who'd caught her eye before she'd ever been engaged to Lord Hoskins and who, as luck would have it, were still available and residing in Carlaby. She could only hope she hadn't misjudged their characters six-and-a-half years ago despite having veen a very young debutante. Either way, with her new disguise, Alice was determined to learn of their true nature *before* wedding vows were said.

Joseph, for his part, had stopped listening and instead began counting the freckles across her nose and cheeks, numbering each under his breath as he poked at them. "Six, seven, ten, eweven, twelve, fourteen, five-teen, sixteen . . ."

Alice chuckled, then kissed him on the forehead. As soon as she found little man a new papa, it appeared he needed a tutor as well. But one thing at a time.

Mrs. Clarke stood upright after having brushed the majority of the loose locks off the floor and into her hand. "Never you fear, Lady Nightingale, I have a few tricks up my sleeves yet. We'll have you looking ladylike and elegant for the ball tomorrow night."

"Thank you, Mrs. Clarke." They'd discussed the best way to introduce herself to Carlaby society at some length. It had been agreed upon that she would show herself as Lady Nightingale first and, while at the ball, lay the groundwork for her "cousin," Mr. Allen, to make his appearance at a local gentlemen's club in a few days' time.

It had sounded all very doable when they'd discussed it before removing themselves to the country. Now that her first appearance was tomorrow—and her hair was short at that—it all felt far less achievable and far more . . . scary.

Joseph left off counting her freckles and instead traced a crease along Alice's forehead. She eased the scowl she hadn't known she'd allowed to show, then took his still somewhat chubby hand and kissed that adorable little finger of his.

"Come now, how about you and I go upstairs and finish rearranging your books and toys in your new nursery?"

“Hurray!” Joseph cried, sliding off her lap and bouncing out of the room. “Come on, Ponto. We’re fixing up our new nursery!” The small brown and white spaniel barked happily and darted after him.

Alice stood and walked toward the door, pausing to look back at Mrs. Clarke. “Thank you again.” She would know Alice meant not only cutting her hair, but also helping her plan this whole insane idea and, of course, for keeping quiet about the whole thing.

“Anything for you, my lady.”

The housekeeper’s sincerity touched Alice. She may no longer have parents or a husband, and she’d never had any siblings or even brothers or sisters-in-law, but she still had a family, small and unusual though it may be. Mr. and Mrs. Clarke were as good to her as any caring aunt and uncle could be, no matter that she employed them as her butler and housekeeper. Even Mary, her abigail, was almost like a friend. And of course there was Joseph—the dearest little boy a mother could ever ask for.

Alice moved out of the room and followed Joseph down the hall and up the stairs. The only family member whose absence they truly felt was that of an attentive husband and father.

And it was up to Alice, this Christmas, to find the right man for the position.

Chapter 2



ISAAC MILLER, Lord Brooks, looked over the ballroom. He'd been unconvinced that there were enough young people in Carlaby to fill a country assembly, but Aunt Margarette had insisted a number of families had removed here for the winter and that finding people to dance with would not be hard.

Apparently, she'd been right.

The room teemed with people, most of whom looked quite near his own age.

"Is she here?" Lord Parsons said, standing just to his left. "She is here, right? I felt certain she'd be here tonight."

"Calm down," Isaac said, shaking his head. "She'll be here."

"Easy for you, Brooks." Parsons folded his arms. "The love of your life didn't up and flee London mere days before you meant to propose."

That was true. Isaac had found no one in London during the season who had even made his heart stammer a bit. Which was a shame, as his many estates sorely needed the boost a good dowry would provide.

"If your lady love isn't here," Lord Robins added with a wolfish grin from Isaac's right, "there are plenty of *other* women here to keep a man entertained well past Twelfth Night."

"We'll only be here a week," Isaac said, shaking his head. "Ten days at the most." Though he doubted it would take half that long for Parsons to speak with Mr. Turner on his daughter's behalf and secure the hand of the woman he never stopped talking about.

"Then you two will hopefully enjoy yourselves during our short visit here," Parsons said, his frustration clear. "Either way, I'm here for Miss Turner." True to his word, Parsons continued to search the ballroom, his gaze jumping from beautiful face to beautiful face without ever hesitating. Until . . . "There she is." Parsons's entire being seemed to lift at the sight of Miss Turner. "Pardon me, gentlemen." He pulled his shoulders back, straightened his already perfect cravat, and strode away.

Isaac watched as his good friend covered the span of half the ballroom in a mere five steps. The man was undeniably besotted. There was a small twinge of longing in Isaac's heart. Aunt Margarette

kept insisting that Isaac should marry for love, not money. But she didn't know the true nature of his finances. It was easy for someone like Parsons to set his sights on a pretty face and pleasing disposition; he hadn't been left a crumbling legacy when he had been no more than fourteen.

"Ah, sweet love," Robins said in a tone that sounded half-mocking, and half-jealous.

Isaac only nodded. Easy for Parsons, indeed. But for men such as himself and Robins, marriage would have to be far more practical. Robins turned away from Parsons and Miss Turner, but Isaac continued to watch them. They didn't stand so close as to cause a scandal, but it was clear in their body language that they had eyes for no one but each other.

"Gads."

Isaac's head came around at Robins's muttered expression. Robins was looking the opposite direction of their mutual friend and was instead focused on the ballroom doors. Or, more accurately, the woman who'd just entered through them.

She was dressed in a luxurious dark green which showed her to have a slim figure; she had a delicate neck, milky skin, and the most stunning auburn curls piled almost completely on top of her head, fastened in place with dozens of tiny pearls.

"Who is that angel?" Robins asked.

"How should I know?" Isaac had arrived in Carlaby three days hence, same time as his friends.

"Your great-aunt—she would know though, surely?" Robins's voice was filled with hope bordering on unabashed eagerness.

"She may." Aunt Margarette had lived here nearly her entire life, so it was likely. Isaac glanced at his friend. Robins stood, staring like a moon-struck calf. First Parsons and now Robins as well?

"She's probably married," Isaac tried. "Look at the color of her dress." He'd never once seen an available young woman wear something so intense.

"But she entered without an escort," Robins countered.

"So her husband stayed in the corridor to speak with someone."

"Oh, no." Robins shook his head adamantly. "She's here alone. I can tell."

Of course he could. Isaac cast his gaze heavenward and let out a sigh. For his friend's sake, he hoped this supposed angel had a large dowry. Robins's holdings were in nearly as bad a situation as his own. "Come, then; let us go find Aunt Margarette and beg an introduction."

As they made their way toward the table where the mulled cider was being served, Robins never once took his eyes off the lady in question for more than a second or two at a time.

“Blast,” Robins said after a minute.

Isaac didn’t ask why for he felt certain his friend would fill him in soon enough.

“She’s already standing up with someone else.”

“The night is still young.” Isaac patted his friend on the back. “There are many more dances to be had yet.”

“Yes. Yes,” Robins muttered to himself. “True. True.”

Good gracious, was the man so head over heels already?

Robins stopped their progress through the room with a hand on Isaac’s arm.

“She even dances like an angel.”

Isaac turned to find that the dance had indeed brought the woman in question quite close to where he and Robins were walking. She moved their way, stepping in tempo with the music and circling around her partner. She was a tall woman, and somehow her height added to her captivating presence. She glanced at Robins first, a soft smile on her lips. Then her gaze jumped to Isaac.

Their eyes met and everything around him faded away. For as fair as her skin was, her eyes seemed to hold a depth to them that beckoned to him. They were green—the most stunning, rich green eyes he’d ever seen. Her lips ticked upward, and though her smile was subtle, it brought a warmth to her eyes.

Then she was gone. Once more spinning about with her dance partner. Isaac realized he hadn’t breathed since her gaze had landed on him, and he had to draw in a deep lung full. What had come over him? With one look, she’d all but paralyzed him. Isaac turned away from her, running a hand down his face.

Someone laughed, light and airy, and he instinctively knew it was her. Isaac glanced over his shoulder regardless. Sure enough, the woman’s soft smile had bloomed at something her partner had said. Her expression was alight with laughter, and Isaac found it hard to force his gaze away.

“Let’s go find your great-aunt,” Robins said.

“Good idea,” Isaac said with a nod.

They found her in the same seat where they’d left her at the beginning of the gathering, at her request, beside the table holding the mulled cider.

“There you both are,” Aunt Margarette said cheerfully. “I do hope you’ve been dancing lots and entertaining all the eligible ladies who are present tonight.”

“Actually,” Robins began before Isaac could say anything, “Mrs. Fudge—”

“Call me Aunt Margarette. I insist.”

“Aunt Margarette,” Robins began again, “we were wondering if

you might perform an introduction for us."

Her entire face seemed to light up. "I would be most delighted. Which lovely young woman has caught your eye?"

Robins spun around so that he was facing the gathering along with Aunt Margarette. "The angel dancing with Lord Gulliver, in the dashing green dress, and with the red hair."

"Auburn," Isaac interjected.

Both Robins and Aunt Margarette turned and stared at him for a moment. Isaac fought the urge to wriggle under their mutual scrutiny. He wasn't sure why he'd said it—the word had come out before he'd realized he'd decided to speak up.

"Red is ordinary, garish." Why did he feel the need to explain? "Hers is clearly more subdued than that." *Regal* is what he'd wanted to call her particular shade, but there was no reason to keep his friend and great-aunt's attention on him longer than necessary.

"Do you know her?" Robins asked Aunt Margarette, quickly returning to the matter at hand.

"I know *of* her."

Was it just Isaac, or did his great-aunt suddenly seem far less willing to provide an introduction? Was there something wrong with the lady?

"Well?" Robins pressed. "Who is she?"

"That is Lady Nightingale." Her tone was flat, her words matter-of-fact. The name was not familiar to Isaac, but clearly whoever this lady was, Aunt Margarette did not approve.

"Oh." Robins seemed to deflate at hearing the woman's name. "Then she is married."

It would sound that way—only a married woman would be called Lady and her title instead of Lady and her first name. Isaac turned toward his friend to offer condolences when Aunt Margarette spoke up once more.

"Widowed, actually."

Robins's smile grew to codfish proportions almost immediately.

"Excellent," Robins muttered.

Isaac scowled. What was so excellent about a woman being widowed at such a young age? Lady Nightingale looked as though she could hardly be a year or two over twenty.

"If you insist on an introduction," Aunt Margarette said, making to rise, "I shall provide one." Isaac's aunt never could stand without a bit of huffing, and she usually required more than a little assistance.

"Don't trouble yourself," Robins said quickly. "She is speaking with a gentleman known to me now. I am sure I can prevail upon him for an introduction."

Aunt Margarette sat back in her chair with relief. She gave Robins

a smile and waved him off. Before Isaac could follow his friend, Aunt Margarette took hold of his arm.

"Sit with me for a minute."

Isaac's stomach lurched at the quickly disappearing opportunity to also be introduced to the beautiful woman. Nonetheless, there would be another chance later tonight, no doubt. And he rather liked the idea of sitting with Aunt Margarette for a spell. Her joints were not taking age well, but her mind was sharp as a whip and her tongue equally so.

"There are some things you should know about Lady Nightingale," Aunt Margarette began once Isaac was seated beside her.

"Oh?" He'd rather thought she'd prefer to discuss a different topic all together, judging by the way she'd clearly not relished speaking of the woman to begin with.

"Her late husband was Lord Hoskins." She watched him as though he ought to know the name.

He didn't but probably should. For just over the past decade, ever since his father had died of an infection of the lungs, it was all Isaac could do to see himself through Oxford so that he might hold his head high among society and keep his holdings from turning belly-side-up completely. Remembering names and making connections was not something he'd found the time for as of yet.

Aunt Margarette leaned in toward him. "Her father was Mr. Grant."

A rush of cold cascaded through Isaac's whole being. Mr. Grant? Now that was a connection he would never forget, no matter how much he wished he could.

"You mean . . . the Mr. Grant who . . ."

"*He* was her father."

If Isaac hadn't been sitting beside his very respectable aunt, he probably would have sworn aloud. As it was, he kept his more colorful thoughts to himself. All his anticipation at making Lady Nightingale's acquaintance burned up. If there was one family he would never care to further his acquaintance with, it was hers.

"What is she doing back in this part of England?" He'd thought after Mr. Grant had swindled him, the family had removed to one of their other holdings, though he supposed, once married, his daughter would have followed her husband about and not her father.

"Lord Hoskins died of a hunting accident just over a year ago. Now that her mourning is over, she has apparently returned to the country." Aunt Margarette's voice dropped low. "And by the way she's acting tonight, I'd say she's come to find a second husband."

"More like find another man to dig her claws into." Lady Nightingale looked stunning, the way she smiled and gracefully

moved toward the edges of the room now that the dance was over. But what else did he expect from the daughter of Mr. Grant? He had been the most manipulating man Isaac had ever been cursed to know. No doubt, his daughter's current charming appearance was merely one piece of a larger game.

"Come now, we don't know her intentions." Nonetheless, Aunt Margarette sounded as though she agreed with him, even if her words said otherwise.

Isaac folded his arms and leaned back in his chair. It didn't matter. She was the daughter of the worst sort of man. He would have to warn Robins away from Lady Nightingale. Hopefully his friend's newfound infatuation would yield little result, and Isaac could turn him away from the scheming woman as easily as he first fell for her.

"I am sorry I did not tell you sooner that she was in town," Aunt Margarette said with sincerity. "I only learned she'd returned to the neighborhood the day before you and your friends arrived. There was no time to write and warn you."

"Do not blame yourself." Still, part of him couldn't ignore the fact that, had he known Mr. Grant's daughter was in Carlaby for the winter, he would have never come himself, not even for so brief a stay. He'd have simply told Parsons to find another friend with a distant family member upon whom he could impose.

Robins took to the dance floor, Lady Nightingale on his arm. As they moved through the steps, nearly half the gentlemen in the room seemed already smitten with her. He wished he could warn them all, tell them what a low trick her father had played on him when he was still too young to have known better.

But then Isaac caught sight of another young woman clearly trying to hold the attention of a man who kept glancing at Lady Nightingale. Isaac's gaze moved from her to two other women on the other side of the room, both quite lovely, both clearly scowling in Lady Nightingale's direction.

"Actually," Isaac said, new realization dawning on him. "I think it might prove good that she's here this Christmas."

Aunt Margarette let out a small huff. "Don't tell me she's already bewitching you."

Isaac let out a dark chuckle. "Certainly not. But look at how many *other* gentlemen she is drawing toward her."

His great-aunt looked about, slowly nodding.

"Now look at how many perfectly lovely and perfectly eligible young women all those gents are ignoring."

Aunt Margarette pursed her lips in a pleased smile. "They do appear quite longing for attention from a handsome man such as yourself."

Isaac gave her a firm nod. “Precisely. Let Lady Nightingale stay. I’m not fourteen anymore, and her father is no longer with us. She can’t hurt me.”

Aunt Margarette patted his arm. “I am more pleased than you know to hear she won’t be beguiling *you* during your stay here.”

“She’s a snake with green eyes, dear aunt. There’s nothing she could say or do that would draw me to her.” He stood and straightened his jacket. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I see several ladies who have been sorely neglected this evening.”

With that, he turned his back on Lady Nightingale and her regal auburn hair and headed toward another point in the room entirely.

Chapter 3



"MAMA! MAMA!"

Alice heard the cry from somewhere far off.

Then came the barking of a dog. Ponto, no doubt.

Alice squeezed her eyes shut and nestled further into her pillow. She was so comfortable just now, her arms and legs at perfect rest, heavy against the mattress. Her room was warm but not stifling. She sighed contentedly, slipping a hand beneath her pillow.

The door swung open with a bang.

"Mama! Mama!" Joseph jumped onto the bed beside her, nearly landing on her leg.

Alice pulled her limbs closer to her to avoid them being flattened by her energetic son.

Joseph placed his hands on the bed directly beside her and leaned his head in close. "It's St. Nicolas Day, Mama. Wake up! It's St. Nicolas Day."

Ponto, obedient enough to stay off the bed, barked happily, the sound of his paws pattering against the floor. He must be spinning in circles for excitement.

Alice opened her eyes and Joseph's round face slowly came into focus.

"Happy St. Nicolas Day, my dearest boy."

"Happy St. Nicolas Day, Mama!" Joseph dropped to give her a hug, his head colliding with Alice's.

"Oh, gracious," Alice said with a giggle and a grimace. "Do be careful, my love."

"Do you think today is the day?" Joseph said, not showing any signs at all that he'd felt the collision as she had.

"The day for what?"

"That Father Christmas will bring me my new papa?"

How could she not have guessed? Alice shut her eyes, rubbing a hand over her face and trying to wake up fully. "I don't think Father Christmas brought you a new father last night."

"Why not?"

"Well, Christmas has only just begun now. The real celebrations happen over the next month. It would be a shame if he brought the

best at the very beginning. We'd hardly know how to celebrate the rest of the season."

Alice's heart hurt as she said the words. She didn't like that she was encouraging Joseph in his fantasy, but she couldn't bring herself to dash all his hopes either.

And she did still have a little time . . . if only a *very* little.

Alice sat up and faced her son's hopeful expression. "We must be patient." She ran a hand through his curly hair.

Joseph let out a long sigh and slipped off her bed. "Okay, Mama." Ponto must have picked up on the change in his master's mood, for he stilled and even let out a little whimper.

Alice peered over the edge of the bed at the small dog; for being so small, he wasn't failing his role in the household as chief distractor.

She turned back to her son. "We have some gifts to hand out to the staff today," she said, hoping to lift his mood. "And I might have picked something up for you." She poked at him playfully.

Joseph giggled at her touch, but then scooted away and instantly sobered.

Alice slipped from her bed and rang for Nancy. Though Joseph put on a brave face, there was no denying he was terribly disappointed.

The morning was spent opening the few small gifts Alice had purchased for Joseph, Mr. and Mrs. Clarke, Nancy, Cook, and the other staff members at Evergreen Cottage. Last year, the Christmas holiday had felt rather lonely, with it being only herself and Joseph. Consequently, Alice had decided that this year, everyone would celebrate together.

As she sat watching her son cheer when Cook grew excited over her new box of ribbons, Alice couldn't help but smile. This was what she wanted for her son, for him to learn from all individuals, no matter their status or station. To learn to see them all as people, with lives and hopes and concerns same as himself.

How she hoped she was giving him that. It was frightfully easy to feel uncertain about how she was raising her child. She wanted nothing more than for him to grow up honorable and respectable, considerate and wise. But raising him alone . . . Alice wasn't sure if she was up to the challenge.

Which was why, the next afternoon, Alice stood with her back toward the long mirror in her bedchamber as Mrs. Clarke wrapped a strip of fabric tightly around her chest. When Alice had first dreamed up acting the part of a man, she'd never imagined how hard it was going to be to simply *breathe* while doing so. Hopefully she wouldn't be called upon to perform any strenuous acts while being Mr. Allen.

Next came the special stays Mrs. Clarke had artfully crafted. The stays secured around her middle, like any would, only these added a

slight bulk, all well-placed, that further concealed her female figure. Alice's lips twisted up at the corner as she glanced down at her new self. She'd already lost a bit of her figure after having Joseph. For the first time, she was almost grateful. This would have been even more difficult a half-dozen years ago.

Her mind flitted back to that summer when she and Lord Hoskins had been engaged. She'd met him but once before Mr. Grant had called her into his study and announced the union had been settled. At seventeen, she'd known far better than to gainsay her father. She'd silently and politely nodded. And that had been that.

A couple of weeks later, she was wife to one of the wealthiest men in the county.

Alice slipped on a shirt and then stepped into the breeches Mrs. Clarke offered. She hadn't had a say then on her future or her lifelong companion. But this time would be different. This time, she wouldn't connect herself to anyone but the very finest of men. No more money-grabbing, status-seeking, duplicitous fakes. She would avoid the flatterers and the charmers. She would avoid the men with wandering eyes—she was wanting a prime example for Joseph—and she would avoid anyone prone to gambling or whose estates were in need of funds. Such a man would never be able to see past her wealth and truly love her separate from the financials she would bring into the marriage.

With a waistcoat and jacket on, Mr. Clarke was summoned in to do her cravat since he'd once served as valet to a well-togged man of means.

"I feel a simple knot is in order for tonight," Mr. Clarke said as he worked. The many wrinkles around his eyes blossomed as he smiled. "Though I cannot say I have ever tied a knot around so short a man's neck."

A small bit of panic shot through Alice. "Do you think my height will be that much of a problem?"

Mr. Clarke only smiled more. The truth of it was that Alice had never met a man who smiled as much as her butler. Between the wrinkles, greying hair, and his large nose and ears, he was the quintessential sweet, old grandfather. It was rather a pity he wasn't *her* grandfather; Alice could dearly use some wise guidance in her life just now.

"You may be tall for a woman," Mr. Clarke said, the knot holding most of his attention, "but you are short for a man. But not too short, I'd wager. And don't forget, people see what they want to see."

It was the mantra the three of them had repeated most often since first coming up with this plan: *people see what they want to see.*

It was the whole reason why Alice was first appearing as Mr. Allen

at the local gentlemen's club. There, of all places, no one would be expecting to see a lady. Mr. and Mrs. Clarke were convinced that so long as other gentlemen believed Mr. Allen to be a man during their first meeting, no one would have cause to question the fact after the matter.

Mr. Clarke finished the cravat and stood back. With hands behind his back, he turned toward his wife. "Is it time for the surprise?"

"Surprise?" Alice asked, her gaze going from one to the other.

Mrs. Clarke walked in front of her, a small tin box in her hand. "I found these from my days on the stage. They weren't exactly the right color but after a quick dye, I think I've just about got it right." She opened the small tin and Alice peered inside.

Only . . . she wasn't exactly sure what she was looking at. There appeared to be two very small, almost rectangular pieces of fur. Mrs. Clarke picked one up and held it up to the side of Alice's face.

"Facial hair?" Alice guessed.

Mrs. Clarke nodded, moving back once more and pulling a small jar from her apron pocket. "Mustaches and beards may have gone out of style years ago, but a bit of hair down the side of your face wouldn't be amiss, and it will help sell the act."

With a bit of glue out of the small jar, Mrs. Clarke adhered the bit of what Alice could only assume was mouse fur just in front of her ear. The fake hair extended almost to her chin. Then she did the other side. It itched a bit and Alice could only hope she'd grow used to the feel rather than be driven mad over it.

Both her housekeeper and butler stepped back. Mr. Clarke extended his hand to Mrs. Clarke. "Spectacles, if you please."

She placed them in his hand. Opening them, Mr. Clarke slipped them onto Alice's face.

Her hair caught beneath the loops around her ears and Alice removed them once more and placed them on herself.

"What do you think?" Mrs. Clarke asked her husband. "Will it work?"

"Will it work? She would be ready for any performance in such a costume as this."

Alice didn't feel so certain. She'd loved this idea ever since it first came to her months ago. But now, standing in a man's suit with her hair short and mouse skin on her face, she was feeling far less confident. "I may be ready for the stage, but I'm not walking onto one. There won't be any distance between me and the audience for my act."

"Never you fear," Mr. Clarke persisted. "You're ready. Turn around."

Alice steeled herself, clenching her hands into fists by her side.

Then, slowly, she turned and faced the tall mirror.

At seeing herself—at seeing the *man* in the mirror—Alice let out a short bark of laughter. “I can’t believe it.” She turned and looked at herself from the side, then straight on once more. “I look . . . like a man.” Who would have thought she’d ever be so pleased to find herself appearing decidedly *un*-feminine?

“Well, Mr. Allen,” Mr. Clarke said. “I believe an afternoon of cards might suit you, sir.”

Alice drew herself up and spoke deeper in her throat, almost so low as to be in her chest. “Thank you, I think a game or two today would be just the thing.” Mr. and Mrs. Clarke had been coaching her on her voice for weeks now and, so long as she spoke slowly, she could carry on quite a long conversation without straining her voice.

Alice turned and moved toward the door, but then stopped. She’d nearly forgotten. There was one other affectation she wished to carry. She turned and moved quickly toward her armoire. Pulling it open, she reached into the back corner and drew out her father’s old cane.

Holding to the gold-plated lion’s head top, she extended it before her.

Neither the housekeeper nor butler were smiling now.

“Are you sure?” Mrs. Clarke asked. They both knew where she’d gotten the cane.

Alice’s fingers moved around the lion’s head; she knew every crevice, ever curve of the stick. It was the perfect embodiment of her father. He’d used it to appear suave and charming in front of guests. He’d used it to prove he was equal to the *ton*, though not born into it.

He'd also used it to pummel furniture when he was angry and away from gossiping tongues. He’d used it to smash her mirror when she’d dared to disagree with him. When she held this cane, it was like he was beside her once more—two-faced and manipulative.

Mrs. Clarke placed a hand on Alice’s shoulder.

Alice shook herself, coming back to the present.

“I need the cane,” she said, her voice normal. “I need the reminder as to why I’m doing this in the first place.”

“Very well,” Mrs. Clarke said, though she didn’t sound convinced.

Mr. Clarke extended a top hat and gentleman’s gloves Alice’s way. She took the gloves first. They were thicker than what she was used to. Then she took the hat and placed it on her head, pushing it down firmly into place. Wearing a top hat was not at all like a bonnet. It wasn’t even like wearing a lace cap. It pressed against her temples and left her ears feeling quite exposed.

Heart pounding in her chest, Alice gave Mr. and Mrs. Clarke one last look. “I’m off, it would seem.”

They gave her smiles and encouraging nods.

With her father's cane in her hand, an uncomfortable top hat on her head, and all the determination she could muster in her heart, Alice moved out the door and off toward the gentlemen's club.



"Seven." Robins called his main and then tossed the dice onto the table.

"Three." Isaac read the dice out loud and shook his head. "I told you, even if you call seven every time, hazard is a game of chance, and you aren't ever guaranteed to win."

Robins scowled and scooped up the dice again. "I have two more goes at it. Don't count me out just yet."

Isaac let out a sigh and returned his gaze to his paper. Sitting a little off to Isaac's right, Robins tossed the dice again. If the groans and hushed chuckles were any indication, Robins threw out once more. Isaac enjoyed a good came of cards, same as the next man. However, when one had to fight to keep every deuced farthing that crossed his palm, playing for stakes simply wasn't appealing. Still, he enjoyed the camaraderie he found here at Greenbulls, the simple gentlemen's club. It wasn't White's or Brooks's, but it was respectable and frequented by more men than Isaac had thought a country establishment would boast.

Another round of groans came from the table and Robins's chair groaned as he pushed away and faced Isaac fully.

"Threw out all three times?" Isaac asked his friend.

Robins only nodded. "Let's hope Parsons is meeting with more luck this morning than I am."

"Indeed." Then again, Parsons wasn't basing his chances solely on luck. No, Parsons had courted Miss Turner most properly for several months, even going so far as to impose upon Isaac and his great-aunt when Miss Turner had to leave London suddenly due to her mother's health. If Mr. Turner denied Parsons's request to marry his daughter this morning, it wouldn't be because the man had left anything up to chance.

"Maybe a game of whist," Robins suggested. "But I don't want to play with you. I want to play with someone unafraid of real risks."

"You mean someone as stupid as yourself?"

"I mean—"

A hush fell around them, and the entire room, as one, seemed to look toward the front doors. Isaac leaned to his left, looking around Robins to see what, or more likely *who*, had garnered everyone's attention.

A man Isaac had never before seen stood just inside the club, his

top hat in one hand, a cane in the other. He was well togged, despite appearing quite young. A manservant hurried forward and the gentleman handed off his hat but kept his cane.

"Must be Mr. Allen," Robins said beneath his breath.

Isaac agreed. Word had started just after the country assembly last week that Lady Nightingale's cousin would be coming to spend the winter with her. After she let it drop that Mr. Allen's good opinion mattered greatly to herself, the man had been elected a member of Greenbulls faster than any gentleman had ever been admitted into any club. With over half the young men in Carlaby bent on courting Lady Nightingale, Isaac hadn't been too surprised.

Not nearly as surprised as he was now to find Mr. Allen young, thin, and almost boyish in appearance with glasses almost too big for his face. Then again, the many freckles across his face may be what gave him such a youthful visage. Freckles alone could dramatically alter one's appearance like that.

But no matter how Mr. Allen looked, or acted, or spoke, Isaac knew better than to trust the man. He was related to Lady Nightingale, which meant he was related to Mr. Grant, which meant he was not someone Isaac cared to associate with. Isaac pulled open his paper and once again turned his gaze toward it.

No matter how much he wished to ignore the happenings around him, however, he was still aware of Mr. Allen being introduced to the gentlemen playing hazard with Robins. It seemed Mr. Allen's voice was a suitable match for his appearance, boyish and young. Poor lad. It was quite possible Lady Nightingale was using him to some unfair advantage. Isaac paused in his reading of recent events. Should he warn the chap? Or was it equally as likely that Mr. Allen knew exactly what his cousin was and was already on his guard?

Isaac eyed Mr. Allen out of the corner of his eye. The gentleman looked hardly the type who would engage in some underhanded plot of his own volition. But, then again, one never could tell just by looks.

"Take a chance?" Lord Gulliver asked Mr. Allen, extending him the dice.

"I think not today," Mr. Allen said, moving around the table and sitting beside Isaac instead.

It made sense the man would sit there, where he could easily converse with those playing hazard while not being in the way of the game. Still, Isaac angled his paper around to block any conversation between himself and Mr. Allen. Perhaps he was doing it a bit brown, but he didn't care for the acquaintance and Mr. Allen might as well realize that now.

Isaac was further ready to read his paper and ignore all else when the conversation, immediately and unsurprisingly, turned to Lady

Nightingale.

Chapter 4



"Is Lady Nightingale enjoying the country?"

"I hear she's come to find a husband."

"Has she mentioned me to you?"

"As beautiful as she was the other night in her green dress, I'll bet she looks even better with it off."

Alice sat, nearly stunned into silence. The barrage of questions wouldn't stop. Her glasses slipped slightly, and she shoved them back up her nose.

"Does she prefer a charmer? Or more of the strong, silent type?"

"Is she as wealthy as they say?"

"I heard she owns more land than even Lord Sempill." With that, the speaker elbowed the very man of whom he spoke.

Alice had not seen Lord Sempill among the other men; truth was, she had barely managed to do more than walk in, shake hands with them all, and find herself a seat. Her head was swimming with all she was feeling and hearing.

It was rather a miracle no one else could hear her heart racing in her chest. It was so loud, Alice could barely hear over it herself. With every *thrump,* a new wave of panic seemed to course through her. Everything inside her screamed to run, to disappear, to do anything besides stay where she was. Her legs itched to cross at the ankle as had been drummed into her since childhood. Her hands ached to fold demurely into her lap. Her neck felt red hot where the tips of her short hair brushed against her skin.

Instead, she kept her legs firmly planted on the floor, her hands on either armrest of her chair, her neck straight. People see what they want to see. Mrs. Clarke's teachings played over and over in her head —Alice's single thread of hope and one she clung to with all the vivacity she could muster.

She was a man here—her own Mr. Allen. If she sold it, those around her would believe it. It was clear from the way the game of hazard continued even while the gentlemen pelted her with questions that they were already believing her charade.

Now, it was time she tested her well-rehearsed voice.

This would be the hardest thing to sell. It had been far easier to

don a jacket and cut her hair than it was to alter the way she sounded. But she very well couldn't learn which man was worthy of her trust—and of a position of high influence in her son's life—if she never said anything.

Alice adjusted her glasses, trying to picture how her father and Lord Hoskins used to act and mimicking those memories. "I believe she is mistress of several estates, each of extensive grounds."

They all stared at her for a moment.

Was that it? Had they caught her in the ruse?

She'd practiced her voice for hours, and she'd thought she'd spoken well.

But if she hadn't . . .

What would these men do? Throw her out? Publicly humiliate her? Suppose this had been as foolish an endeavor as Mrs. Clarke warned? What if she'd just sentenced herself, and worse, her son, to a life of ridicule and scorn?

Lord Sempill reached across the table and shoved a gentleman who'd introduced himself as Lord Robins. "You hear that? *Several* estates."

Lord Robins chuckled, his eyebrows wagging. "And each of *extensive* grounds."

Alice drew in a deep breath but tried to hide it all the same. That was the first major obstacle cleared. As of yet, no one seemed suspicious.

Lord Sempill picked up the dice, still speaking to Lord Robins. "Too bad you have so little to recommend yourself." The men laughed, and Lord Sempill threw the dice.

Alice felt herself relax slightly. The men's focus was momentarily on the game, granting her a space of time to look about and get her bearings once more. Everything about this room felt foreign, from the heavy smoke in the air and the strong, biting smell of alcohol, to the boisterous, deep laughter and frequent coarse language. Strange and uncomfortable though this place was, now that Alice had a moment to breathe and settle her nerves, she found a whole new emotion surging like a rapidly rising tide toward the surface.

She was elated.

The thrill of acting, the allure of being somewhere she ought never step foot . . . it was nearly intoxicating.

She could do this. She could move throughout the room, learn what she'd come to learn, and leave with her name still in good standing. Alice shut her eyes momentarily, squeezing the armrest beneath her gloved hands. Mr. Clarke had warned her that she might begin to feel this way. He'd admonished her to not allow herself to get carried away. She was to remain calm and in character.

She was here to listen, not necessarily to talk.

Opening her eyes once more, Alice glanced about, taking note of the game, the men cheering for the winners and jeering at the losers, and, in particular, the man sitting closest to her. He'd lifted his paper up, blocking her view of his face, the moment she'd strode over this way. He seemed most adamant in his desire to *not* join in the conversation regarding Lady Nightingale or meet Mr. Allen.

Alice opened her mouth, thinking to ask him a direct question. Perhaps she could draw him out. She found herself curious about the man who'd, out of hand, dismissed a connection with the new wealthy widow of Carlaby.

But she hesitated. If he didn't desire the connection, would it not draw more attention to herself if she pushed it? She may not have been found out *yet*, but that didn't mean there wasn't adequate reason to remain as unobtrusive as possible. Alice leaned back in her seat once more.

"Tell us." Lord Sempill spoke in her direction. "Does your cousin prefer compliments regarding her attire or her complexion?"

Alice was momentarily unsure how to answer. But everyone was watching her again, waiting to hear what she might say. Did Lord Sempill think that the way to her heart was with the *right* compliments? Did he truly see her as such a simpleton? Alice shifted in her seat. "I am sure all sincere compliments would be well-received."

It was rather a letdown if he did see Lady Nightingale in so unenlightened a way. Alice had danced with him the other night and had left the assembly thinking well of Lord Sempill. He'd been all that was polite and attentive. Quite proper. But now, he was quickly falling in her esteem.

Well, such had been the entire point of this trip. If she was already seeing results, so much the better.

"What I want to know," Lord Robins said, drawing his words out, "is why she goes by Lady *Nightingale*. Her father was a Mr. Grant, or so my friend tells me"—he kicked at the man hiding behind his paper —"and her late husband was called Hoskins. So, where did Nightingale come from?"

Once more, all eyes turned to Alice.

"Lady Nightingale is a peeress in her own right." It was strange explaining her own story as though it belonged to someone else. "She inherited the title through her mother, the late Countess Nightingale."

"A *countess*?" one of the men said. The other gentlemen grunted and looked at one another. Was it in awe? In surprise? Alice couldn't fully tell. Perhaps a bit of both? It was far more common when a woman was made a peeress in her own right for her to be titled a

baroness. But it certainly wasn't unheard of to be titled a countess.

Alice, for her part, had always had mixed emotions regarding her mother's, and now her own, title.

The man hiding behind the paper let out a disapproving guffaw, causing Alice to turn toward him and stopping her from being lost once again in her own conflicting emotions regarding the title she now held.

"I beg your pardon, sir?" Alice asked, barely dropping her voice in time.

The man moved the paper away from his face, his gaze catching hers immediately. She knew those eyes. Where did she know them from?

The assembly the other night. She'd seen him there. He'd caught her eye, and she'd smiled at him. He never did ask her to dance, though. More still, in that brief moment, he hadn't looked at her as he was now, with malice and prejudice.

A new heat stole up her cheeks. One she simultaneously wished she could brush away, while it also made her want to lean in closer. His light brown hair was cropped a bit shorter than was the style. Certainly shorter than her own. And he didn't sport any long sideburns. The sight made her own fake sideburns suddenly itch against her cheeks. His jaw was angular and the way he filled out his jacket . . . good heavens, she could not be caught staring. Not when she was *Mr. Allen.*

There was no denying that this man was far too handsome for her good. Alice forced her eyes back up to his. She was a man just now, and as such, she knew she couldn't be the first to turn away from a stare-down.

"Mr. Allen," Lord Robins said lazily, which seemed to be the way he said everything, "may I make you known to my friend, Lord Brooks."

Out of habit, Alice's hand dropped to where her skirt usually would have been as if making to curtsy. Catching herself, Alice shifted in her seat to hide the movement and instead stuck her hand out for Lord Brooks to shake.

He eyed her for a moment longer, then turned away, and instead of shaking her hand, he folded his paper completely.

The cut was not lost on their audience and a soft murmur moved through the gentlemen. Alice's jaw tightened, her nostrils flaring, and the hair on the back of her neck—short though it was—stood on end.

"I, for one," Lord Brooks said, "am not surprised the lady in question chose to go by the higher title available to her."

"She certainly isn't the first to go by a higher title, no matter it wasn't her husband's." Angry and incensed, Alice had to struggle more

than usual to keep her voice low in her throat.

"No, she certainly isn't," Lord Brooks agreed, though his tone wasn't any more friendly. "And she won't be the last. All I'm saying is I'm not surprised that she, of all people, would choose to do so."

"As it is perfectly ordinary for Lady Nightingale to assume her mother's title, I would ask why you judge her so harshly for it." Of all the things a woman was judged for, that seemed paltry in comparison.

Especially when considering what she was in the act of doing that very moment.

"You must forgive my friend his rudeness," Lord Robins said, handing the dice off to another man. "He has apparently had dealings in the past with the late Mr. Grant, and it left a bit of a sour taste in his mouth."

Lord Brooks turned his scowl toward his friend. "The man was a blackguard."

A few of the gentlemen laughed, and Lord Sempill said, "You going to call him out for that, Mr. Allen?"

Of course she wouldn't—not only because she was a woman, but because she agreed far too much with Lord Brooks's assessment of her father.

"No, I think not," Alice said. "I am related to Lady Nightingale on her mother's side. I hardly knew Mr. Grant at all."

That seemed to satisfy the men, and one of them called a number and threw the dice.

"I hope your good mood continues," Lord Robins said to Alice. "Brooks is determined that no one should make a match with Lady Nightingale."

"Because of whom her father was?" Alice asked. That seemed rather far to go over a longstanding grudge. What was it her father had done to him? That her father had had dealings with a man who's name she'd never even heard before today wasn't at all surprising. But she was intensely curious now. Perhaps she'd look through her father's records after returning home today and see if she could find anything.

"What does it matter whom her father was?" a man at the table asked. "He's dead now."

The other men seemed to agree.

Another man lifted his glass of bourbon. "I think the matter is quite clear. Honestly, what woman can manage all those holdings on her own? Lady Nightingale is wise to realize she needs a man."

Alice narrowed her gaze at the man. Though they'd been introduced when she'd first walked in, her head had been swimming at the time and she could no longer recall his name. Not that it mattered anymore, for she had summarily removed him from her list of possible husbands the moment he'd spoken.

“I disagree,” Lord Brooks said. “Her husband passed over a year ago and, unless you have heard otherwise, I think it safe to assume she has managed fine on her own.”

The man whose name no longer mattered scowled at Lord Brooks. When he spoke, his voice seemed light enough to be all in fun, but there was an underlying hard current; Alice could only assume this man did not like being told he was wrong. “She certainly couldn’t be doing worse than you are, Brooks.”

The gentlemen laughed, and Lord Brooks cast his gaze heavenward. For his part, Brooks took the teasing insult rather well. No self-important huff as Lord Hoskins would have done. No dark scowl and angry rant as her father would have expressed.

“You tell us,” Lord Robins said to her. “Are Lady Nightingale’s affairs in order? Or is she looking for a man to save her?”

Save her? *Hardly*.

But she couldn’t voice her true feelings here—not on this score, anyways.

“I have only just joined my cousin a few days ago,” she said; it was important to keep up the act, after all. “But all the signs lead me to believe that the countess’s holdings are in better shape now than they’ve ever been.”

And by that she meant that she spoke with her man of business frequently. She read every report thoroughly. In the past year, she’d visited every holding except the one in Carlaby—part of the reason she’d chosen this location to spend winter—and she’d talked to nearly every farmer and individual leasing her many lands.

Though she didn’t have much to thank her late father or husband for, one thing they had given her was a thorough understanding of how to run a large estate and keep it growing in profits.

“That’s all I need to hear,” one of the men at the table said. “I think I’ll call on the pretty lady tomorrow morning.”

“I’d advise against it,” Lord Brooks said.

Was he *still* going on about how horrid it would be to be paired in a match with her? She truly needed to get home and riffle through her father’s books and learn for herself what he’d done to Lord Brooks. He seemed like quite a nice man, other than his intense hatred of her and her family.

“Far from *needing* a husband to keep her holdings afloat,” Lord Brooks said to them all, “I rather think she’s here expecting to outsmart the lot of us.”

A small tingle ran down Alice’s spine. A warning. Alice leaned back in her chair, facing Lord Brooks more fully, but also half-readying herself to run if necessary.

The gentlemen at the table only scoffed at his words.

Lord Brooks shook his folded paper their direction. “Mark my words. That lady is far more clever than any of you are giving her credit for.”

“What exactly do you expect from her?” Lord Robins asked.

“The devil only knows what tricks of manipulation she will assume while here. I knew her father. I daresay she isn’t much different.”

Not much different from her father?

How dare he?

This man, who knew nothing about her—not what her life had been like or what was in her heart or why she was here—was seeing fit to judge her. To call her manipulative.

She tightened a hand into a fist . . .

And felt the thick, masculine fabric against her fingers and palm.

An embarrassing chagrin flooded her cheeks. She supposed he was correct on one score. She *wasn’t* being wholly honest with these men. But she wasn’t malicious in her dishonesty. She wasn’t trying to hurt anyone. She was only doing what was necessary to keep herself and her son safe.

Alice didn’t regret what she was doing. But that someone, a stranger no less, had guessed that she was capable of such duplicity was unnerving in the extreme.

Chapter 5



THE CONVERSATION at the hazard table picked up once more, and finally, the topic of Lady Nightingale seemed to have come to an end. Alice relaxed a bit and turned her focus to listening silently. A few other ladies were brought up; apparently, Lord Brooks and Lord Robins had a mutual friend who would very soon be engaged. Lord Sempill crowed that he was seriously looking for a wife since his estates had done exceptionally well that year.

This brought the conversation around to the year's profits. A few of the men boasted of their gain. Many more complained that the unexpectedly wet spring had ruined more than one field of crops. Alice could relate. Several of her farmers had come to her with multiple issues. It hadn't been easy, but she'd faced the problems head on, consulted with everyone under her charge, read every book she could get her hands on, and in the end, they'd managed to save most of their crops.

Alice listened closely to best learn who was wise with their holdings and who was simply sitting on their hands, expecting those who leased the land to figure out the problems themselves. Several of the men fell into the first category, none of whom she remembered by name. Next time she would certainly have to do a better job at recalling names after being introduced.

"It was a rough year, indeed," Lord Robins said. "Wouldn't you say, Brooks? You lost more of your crop than I did, I know."

Alice wasn't sure what keeping a man like Lord Robins around as a friend said about Lord Brooks. It was quite clear the man couldn't keep a secret if his life depended upon it.

Lord Brooks lifted a hand and half shrugged. "The spring corn took it the hardest."

Alice found herself nodding. Several of her farmers, too, had struggled with their spring corn.

"I told you to do as Townshend recommends and rotate your crop," Lord Robins chided, shaking a finger at his friend.

"Good, ol' Turnip Townshend," one of the other men said with a chuckle. "Where would England be without him and the four-field crop rotation?"

More laughs. Though Lord Brooks smiled along with them, Alice could see weariness in his eyes, too. He didn't appear to be a man who cared but little for his loss of crops.

"Brooks doesn't subscribe to Townshend," Lord Robins continued.

The other men looked at him, most in surprise. Alice could not stop herself from doing the same. Townshend was regarded a brilliant mind and many a landowner had him to thank for their profits.

Lord Brooks gave his friend a pointed glare before responding. "Most of my land is divided out into farms too small to rotate through four different crops."

"So, get rid of some of your farmers," one of the men scoffed. "Condense the holdings."

Robins laughed. "That's what I keep telling him. But Brooks doesn't listen well. He's too worried about the farmers' families and health and babies and well-being."

"You'll only drag the lot under," Lord Sempill said. "You'd be better off by letting a few farmers go so that the others can live better."

"Not to mention *you'll* live better," another man said. "Speaking of, did I tell you all my brother's news?"

Again, the conversation shifted, this time drifting off toward news of families. Scandal and unexpected deaths. Hunting trophies and promotions in the army.

Lord Brooks returned to his paper beside Alice. The conversation had made it clear that he struggled financially, no matter that he was titled and owned land. She couldn't help but be touched that, despite his own tight situation, he'd not passed his hard times on to others, requiring them to pay the price for his own comfort. So many men she'd known had done exactly that; it was easy to assume that's how *all* men acted.

She knew a sudden desire to help him—this man who her own father had hurt.

The late Mr. Grant had used people his entire life. He saw them as nothing but steppingstones, as rungs on a ladder. Alice's mother he'd used for her connections and wealth and to bring a title into his family. He'd used Alice much the same way, marrying her off the moment she was old enough to be a temptation to one of his associates. He'd used her to further his own influence and positions. She may not have known much about his dealings with other gentlemen, but she imagined he'd used them as well. Any chance he got, any person who showed the slightest signs of being of use, Mr. Grant had taken advantage.

She didn't often feel called upon to right her father's wrongs, but if she could make a small penance to this man for what her father had

done, she shouldn't let the opportunity pass her by.

"Have you read Mills's *A New System of Practical Husbandry*?" she asked Lord Brooks in a quiet voice.

He peeled the paper back a small bit, eying her. "I am in possession of volumes one through three."

She'd forgotten to take into account that Lord Brooks already hated her. He probably assumed she was being condescending or overly forward. Then again, she was a man just now. So perhaps not?

"Mills is an advocate of small farms," Alice explained. "There are volumes four and five in the library at Evergreen Cottage. I am sure Lady Nightingale would not mind if I loaned them out to you."

His cold demeanor didn't thaw. "Much obliged to you, I'm sure." He flicked the paper back up into place, blocking her view of him once more.

Alice watched the paper for several minutes. It was acutely painful to know there was at least one person in England who thought she was exactly like her father. As the other men ended their game of hazard and drifted off toward other entertainment, the excitement began to wear on Alice, making her more tired than anything.

After a moment, she stood, bid farewell to the few gentlemen still speaking with Lord Robins, and headed toward the door.

It was her first adventure out as Mr. Allen, and she had to admit it had been quite a success. At least, no one had called her out for impersonating a man. That alone was worthy of celebrating. But she'd also gained quite a bit of useful information.

In just a few short hours, she'd learned that several of the men of her acquaintance were not worthy of her time and attention, and that at least one man in Carlaby thought the very same of her.



Isaac placed another forkful of potatoes in his mouth. Another bite he hardly tasted. His mind was too filled with the conversations of that afternoon. Particularly of meeting Mr. Allen. He hadn't meant to come down so hard on the young man. He should have held his tongue.

After all, Mr. Allen looked more like a boy than a man. He'd entered Greenbulls with a look on his face, one that was more uncertainty and apprehension than anything. It was the look of a boy, barely a young man, who was associating with grown men for the first time and likely realizing he was not so very grown himself.

Isaac shook his head and placed the last bite of potato in his mouth.

Considering the young man's age, he shouldn't have been so hard on him about his uncle. Mr. Allen was only related to Mr. Grant

through marriage, after all. It seemed Mr. Allen had hardly known his uncle; it was unfair for Isaac to lay blame on him for what happened a decade earlier.

Robins stuck his elbow in Isaac's side. And he didn't do it gently.

Isaac hid his grunt and then turned and scowled at his friend.

Far from looking apologetic, Robins only threw his chin the direction of Parsons, sitting across from them at the dinner table.

Isaac nodded his understanding.

"Care to go riding tomorrow?" Isaac asked the table as a whole. Parsons had left Cresthearth Manor that morning with a bounce in his step and a smile as bright as the sun. He'd returned a little before Isaac and Robins had, looking decidedly less cheerful. Parsons hadn't brought up his conversation with Mr. Turner that morning, and neither Isaac nor Robins had dared to do it for him.

"Thank you for my share of the invite," Aunt Margarette said. "But it will undoubtedly be too cold for me. I haven't ridden atop a horse for years either way."

"Will you feel neglected if we ride out, Aunt?" Isaac asked with a smile. The more he'd gotten to know his great aunt these past few days, the more he'd come to like her. She spoke her mind but was always kind about it.

"Not in the least, dear boy," she said. "Only do me a favor and keep your eyes out for some fine evergreen boughs so I might know where to direct the footmen to find them on Christmas Eve."

"We would be happy to," Isaac said. "Care to join us, Parsons?"

"Excuse me?" Parsons said, finally looking up from his plate.

"Do you want to go riding with Robins and myself tomorrow?"

He tipped his head back and forth. "Very well."

Isaac shared a look with Robins. Clearly, things had not gone well this morning for their friend.

"Lord Parsons," Aunt Margarette said, her voice gentle. "We all know the topic of conversation between yourself and Mr. Turner this morning, and none of us are blind to how you are acting now."

Parsons shifted about in his seat. "I apologize for being such poor company."

"No one is complaining, Parsons," Isaac said, glancing at Aunt Margarette. She nodded her agreement.

"Did he send you packing?" Robins asked.

Isaac shot his friend a scowl; surely Robins could have asked with more tact than that.

Parsons's face wrinkled as his expression morphed through a variety of emotions. "Not exactly."

"Then he gave his permission," Isaac said.

"Not exactly that either."

Aunt Margarette reached a hand out, as though to pat him on the arm. “I think you’d best start from the beginning.”

Parsons let out a loud sigh, dropping his fork loudly onto his plate. “I guess I might as well.” He placed both hands on the table, staring down at first one group of fingers and then the other. “When I first walked in, he greeted me warmly. I thought for certain all would go my way. I explained to him my intentions to offer for Miss Turner.”

Everyone was silent as Parsons spoke. They all knew that Mr. Turner intended to allow his daughter to choose for herself whom to marry, provided he was an honorable man of some standing who could comfortably provide for her and any children. Parsons matched all the requirements in Isaac’s mind; he was respected by all, was master of no fewer than four estates, and clearly adored Miss Turner and would see to all her wants.

“However,” Parsons continued, “he stopped me part-way through and explained that Mrs. Turner is not doing so well as everyone believes. Her illness which first brought the entire family to the country has not abated. Indeed, Mr. Turner insists that his daughter is quite overwrought.” Parsons paused there.

After a minute, Robins prompted him with the single word, “And?”

Parsons cast his gaze heavenward. “He said something about now not being a suitable time for me to speak to her on the subject.”

That was a blasted shame. Isaac and Robins shared a look—they both seemed to be thinking the same thing. Robins shook his head sadly and returned to eating. There seemed nothing left to do except the same, so Isaac picked up his fork once more and stabbed at his beef.

“Now wait just a minute, you three,” Aunt Margarette said.

Isaac glanced up to find her staring them all down.

“I’d hate to think that not one of you has been taught any more persistence than that,” she said with a petulant turn to her lips. Placing a hand on her armrest, Aunt Margarette twisted around and faced Parsons. “Do you love the young woman?”

Parsons glanced at Isaac and then Robins as if trying to judge what he’d just landed himself in. “I do,” he said at length. “Most decidedly.”

“Then cheer up. Mr. Turner didn’t say you can’t offer for her *ever*, he only said not *yet*.”

Parsons bowed his head, appearing quite lost in thought.

“Think of Miss Turner,” Aunt Margarette continued. “The poor girl is no doubt quite upset about her mother’s failing health. Though she might be ready to accept you, how can she possibly make such a life-altering decision when she doesn’t even know how long her mother with be with her? Instead of proposing just now, continue to be kind and attentive. You know her far better than I do, but I’d suggest if

she's the kind of lady who enjoys getting out of the house now and then, you call on her often and give her the opportunity to go riding in the snow or visit the shops in town. If she enjoys staying in, bring her new threads to embroider with or some new Christmas carols you might sing together."

Parsons was slowly returning to the excited man he'd been that morning. "Do you think it would work?"

"Of course," Aunt Margarette said. "Once things are . . . settled with her mother, one way or the other, she'll only love you more for having had you by her side all this time."

"You're right." Parsons sat up straight. "I can do that. I'd do anything for her." He angled himself toward Aunt Margarette. "I know she dearly loves a dinner party."

"Then we shall host one," Aunt Margarette agreed without hesitation.

Rogers nearly jumped from his seat. "And we should invite Lady Nightingale."

"Good heavens, why?" Isaac blurted out. The idea of a dinner party at Cresthearth Manor had sounded enjoyable, that was, until Robins opened his mouth and altered the guest list.

"We can't invite *only* Miss Turner and her father," Robins said. "The men would far outnumber the ladies."

He had a point. "Then why not the misses Bennett and their mother? That would be three women and very nearly round us out perfectly."

"That would push us too far the other way, leaving us as *five* women and only four men," Robins countered. "I say we invite the Turners, Lady Nightingale and her cousin Mr. Allen, and . . . Mr. and Mrs. Dowding and their two daughters. That would be perfect."

Perfect in terms of numbers, but hardly the guest list Isaac wished to entertain.

"Didn't you dance with Miss Dowding at the assembly last week?" his aunt asked Isaac.

Had he? He didn't remember much from after Lady Nightingale had shown up, other than how much he hadn't wished to remain aware of where in the room she stood or who she danced with. And yet, he'd had a hard time focusing on anything else.

Still, the name Dowding did sound familiar. "I believe so."

"The Dowdings moved here many years ago," Aunt Margarette said, her tone overly innocent. "Miss Dowding is an especially sweet girl."

Isaac eyed his great aunt. Was she attempting to matchmake?

She looked back at him with innocent eyes that fooled no one.

"Very well," Isaac said at length. "I suppose I can abide being in

the same room as Lady Nightingale for an evening." He turned toward Robins. "But I leave it up to you to keep her entertained." He could be in the same room as her, but he didn't trust himself to stay civil if forced to speak with her.

"I wouldn't have it any other way," Robins said, leaning back in his chair.

Parsons's smile slipped a bit. "Aunt Margarette, I know you were not planning on guests all through Christmas."

"Don't worry about it. I am thrilled to have you three. Truly, I am. You are free to stay well past Epiphany if necessary."

Parsons's smile came back as bright as ever. "Thank you." He stood quickly, and a footman hurried over to catch his chair before it crashed to the floor. "Come, Robins, let's plan out the evening activities."

Robins agreed, and the two quickly left the dining room.

Isaac only watched them, slowly shaking his head. "I never thought I'd see the day when those two began acting like schoolgirls."

"Watch yourself, Isaac," Aunt Margarette said in a gentle tone. "You very well may find yourself acting just like that one of these days."

"I doubt it." He may have accepted that he needed to marry, but he wasn't looking for love. Only for a good companion, someone he could respect and tolerate with equanimity, and preferably with a large dowry.

"Either way," Isaac said, turning away from the door and back toward his great aunt. "It appears you have me and the girls for another few weeks, after all."

"Splendid. Now . . ." Aunt Margarette's smile spread. "Tell me what you truly think about Miss Dowding."

Chapter 6



ONE ASPECT of her disguise Alice had not anticipated was how long it took to fully cover up her freckles. It was such a defining characteristic of her face, she'd felt certain that leaving them visible when she was Mr. Allen and covering them with paint when she was Lady Nightingale would be essential to setting apart her roles as two different people.

However, as she sat for over an hour in front of her dressing room mirror while Mrs. Clarke rubbed white paint over her face, she seriously questioned the decision. And now that she'd made an appearance as Lady Nightingale without freckles, it required that she have her face painted every morning before any callers or visitors happened by.

Every morning.

Without fail.

No matter if she expected visitors that day or not, the paint had to be applied. This was the country, after all, and unexpected visits were to be, ironically enough, expected.

To make the matter even more tedious, she often had to have the paint reapplied before dinner, most especially if she planned to go anywhere that evening. While it had been long the first few times, it was very quickly becoming what felt like a never-ending ordeal.

Many women wore paint on their faces, particularly those of an indeterminate age. Only a few decades ago, white paint had been all the rage. Though it was largely abandoned now, eschewed in all the ladies' magazines as "unnatural" and "undesirable," the art had not been lost. It was still practiced by those who were wishing to hide their age, or more commonly, hide lingering scars and pockmarks of childhood diseases.

Mrs. Clarke stood up straight, dipping her rag into the jar of specially made white paint as she walked around Alice, getting ready to tackle her left side.

First father, and afterward, her late husband had always scolded her for not wearing a bonnet often enough when venturing outside. Alice wrinkled her nose and several still exposed freckles blended into fewer, larger spots. It wasn't as though she hadn't tried to protect her

skin, only, her face liked to freckle and there was nothing for it.

"Nearly there, my lady," Mrs. Clarke said, bending down over her left cheek and scrubbing paint on.

Alice tried to keep her face as still as possible. It felt an age before Mrs. Clarke finally stood and pronounced her finished. Alice chose not to study her own face in the mirror for long. She glanced at herself to check that all was in order—no streaks of the paint were glaring and no freckles had missed her housekeeper's careful eye—and then she stood and moved into the center of the room where her abigail, Nancy, helped her dress for dinner at Cresthearth Manor.

The invitation had surprised her greatly. After reading it, she'd taken a full five minutes before she could speak and explain to Mrs. Clarke the reason for her shock. They'd spent the better part the day debating if she should go as Lady Nightingale or as Mr. Allen.

To go as Lady Nightingale meant she could further a connection with Lord Robins, who clearly liked her.

To go as Mr. Allen meant she would endure far less judgment and hostility.

In the end, however, it was decided she should attend as herself. Mr. Allen was how she would learn who was worthy of her attentions, but the end goal was for someone to offer for Lady Nightingale—an event that would never happen if the lady never went out into society and made connections.

Though Alice agreed wholeheartedly with their decision, secretly, she was simply not ready to attend as Mr. Allen. Alice was feeling better about her Mr. Allen portrayal but was not yet completely confident. Somehow, the thought of attending a small, intimate dinner party as Mr. Allen felt far more dangerous than showing up as him at Greenbulls.

Once the dark purple dress was all in place, Nancy next tackled Alice's hair. First, Nancy combed the short auburn strands into submission, using enough pomade for the hair to remain in place. Then, she placed an old box, which had once held elbow-length gloves, on the table. Opening it up, she pulled out one of the many curls Mrs. Clarke had fashioned from Alice's cut hair.

Some curls were secured to a bow and others to a small collection of pearls, either of which could be pinned against Alice's head and give her the appearance of having long hair once more. Mrs. Clarke had even fashioned some buns, already turned and pinned into place, which Nancy could simply secure on top. It took longer for Nancy to do her hair now than it used to, but the result was nearly as flattering.

Indeed, Alice felt almost like her old self again.

"You do lovely work, Nancy," she said as her abigail stepped back and began gathering up the few unused curls and placing them into

the glove box.

"Thank you, my lady."

With some hair appearing to be pulled up atop her head, and a few curls left hanging down her neck, Alice stood and finally made her way downstairs. As she reached the front entry, Joseph ran up to her and wrapped his arms around her legs, nearly tripping her. Ponto didn't help when he placed his two small front feet against her as well.

"Oh, my darling," Alice said with a laugh. "You're getting so big." She bent down and swooped Joseph into her arms. Ponto yipped and sat up, his tail wagging happily. "One of these days, you're going to knock Mama right over."

Joseph hugged her tightly around her neck with a giggle. "Your freckles are hiding again."

"Yes, they are. But I will find them before tomorrow morning, I promise."

He patted her cheeks, directly where her fake sideburns would rest if she had them on. "I'm glad you shaved. I don't like your face all hairy."

Oh dear, what was she teaching her child? "I prefer my face when it's not hairy as well."

"When will I have to start shaving?"

"When you are older."

"And how does one do it?" he asked.

That was an excellent question, one she'd never put much thought into. "Well, with a blade. Something similar to a small knife. Only it is very straight."

His brow creased. "Wouldn't you cut yourself if you used a knife?"

"You certainly can, which is why you must always be very careful."

His eyes brightened. "Can you show me?"

"No. I'm sorry, my dear," Alice said, shaking her head. She could mimic the motion of shaving one's face, but she had no practical experience and would likely do it all wrong. Then, when Joseph tried it, he'd only cut himself. Of course, Joseph would have his own valet by the time he needed to shave, but she didn't want her son so dependent on money that he couldn't even see to his own basic needs.

What Joseph needed was a father to show him the proper, *safe* way to shave.

His small face crumpled in disappointment, and Alice's heart ached at the sight.

"Will you be home before Jane puts me to bed?" Joseph asked after a minute.

Mr. Clarke approached with Alice's thickest pelisse, softest gloves, and a muff for added warmth.

She put Joseph down. “Not this time. Dinner parties usually go far later than little boys should stay up.” She reached out behind her, and Mr. Clarke helped her into the pelisse.

“But I want to hear the story about Father Christmas again,” Joseph protested.

Alice pulled on first one glove and then the other. “How about tomorrow night? I don’t have any dinner plans.”

“Very well.” He dragged out the words, clearly disappointed.

“Don’t look so sad, dearest,” she said, kneeling down to be eye level with him. “You and Ponto will have fun while I’m away, I’m sure of it.” She shot the ever-growing puppy a look. Ponto was supposed to be keeping Joseph’s mind off needing a father. That was the reason she’d first gotten him for Joseph earlier that year.

“Ponto wants to run outside.”

Hearing Joseph say his name, the dog barked and stood on all fours once more.

“I know, but it’s far too cold for a little puppy.” Alice hated how often she had to say no to him.

“He’s not so little anymore,” Joseph insisted.

“He has grown, but he’s still a puppy. The snow will hurt his paws, and the cold air isn’t good for his lungs.”

“I’ll let him wear some of my old boots.”

Alice kissed Joseph on the forehead. “Not today.” Ponto whimpered, nuzzling up closer to her. Alice leaned down and kissed him on the top of his head as well. Silly pup, he may be adorable, but he was completely failing at his one and only responsibility in their house. Perhaps it was time she took him aside and spoke to him.

Mrs. Clarke swept into the entryway. “Tell your mother good night, Master Joseph, then hurry upstairs. Jane is waiting for you in the nursery.”

“Good night, Mama.” Joseph kissed her on the cheek then bolted up the stairs, Ponto barking and dashing after him.

Alice stood and took the muff from Mr. Clarke. “I do hope he behaves tonight. I’m afraid if he keeps being so wild, we will lose Jane.”

Mrs. Clarke shook her head. “Nonsense. Jane is as fond of that boy as the rest of us are. Don’t you fret. He’s only excited because Christmas is coming. All boys act this way now and then, and Jane knows it. Now,” Mrs. Clarke held out the brown paper-wrapped package Alice had asked her to prepare. “You run along and have a grand time tonight.”

Alice turned away from the stairs and took the package, holding it between herself and her muff. “Thank you.” It was not common for the mistress of a house to be so close to her staff, but Alice had never

had many friends, and when life had left her widowed and alone, it was Mr. and Mrs. Clarke who'd first bridged the gap between their stations, figuratively putting their arms around her and caring in a way she'd never experienced before.

She took a few steps toward the door, and Mr. Clarke opened it, his usual smile as bright as ever.

"I don't know why I'm so nervous," Alice found herself saying. "I sincerely believe Lord Robins is only soft on me because of my wealth, and I know not another soul at Cresthearth Manor who cares two straws for me."

Mrs. Clarke placed a hand against her back, urging her forward. "And yet, you don't wish to appear snobbish by refusing your first dinner invitation."

"No, certainly not." Squaring her shoulders, Alice stepped out into the winter evening. A drifting snowflake landed on her nose. She could do this. It was just dinner and maybe a game or two of cards.

From further in the house, Ponto's happy bark reached her. Alice glanced back only briefly before turning and walking resolutely toward the waiting carriage. It was up to her to see that Joseph had a new father. After all, Ponto was most decidedly *not* doing his job of filling the need for her son.



Alice arrived at Cresthearth Manor without incident and was shown into the parlor. She still carried the books all wrapped and tied with a bit of twine. The room was quite comfortable; a large fire blazed in the hearth, two rather large settees faced one another in the center of the room, and smiles and cheerful conversation seemed to fill the space.

The conversation tapered off, however, as Alice moved further into the room. Every eye seemed to be on her. Alice's heart began to race. Did the gentlemen recognize Mr. Allen in her? Did they see now what they'd missed before?

Lord Robins strode over to her. "Lady Nightingale, how lovely you look this evening."

Alice smiled and tried to clamp down on her nerves. They were only staring because she was still very new to the neighborhood. Not because they knew; her secret was still safe.

She drew in a breath and willed her shoulders to ease. "You are too kind. Allow me to thank you for the invitation."

He extended his arm for her to take, but as she did, she felt a familiar tingle course down her spine. Alice looked around Lord Robins and at the many other guests in the room. Her gaze found Lord

Brooks almost immediately. He stood with an elbow resting atop the mantel. As she had anticipated, he was not smiling.

"May I introduce you to the others?"

Alice pulled her gaze and her mind back to the gentleman before her. She nodded her consent, and together they moved through the room. Mr. Turner and his daughter, Lydia, were already known to her. But Alice was most pleased to make the acquaintance of Mr. and Mrs. Dowding and their two daughters, Miss Dowding and Miss Cecilia Dowding. Both young women seemed quite sweet. Miss Dowding was in pale blue and spoke of the unfortunate cold weather. Miss Cecilia Dowding wore soft pink and commented that she didn't mind the winter so terribly, so long as it snowed often enough to blanket everything in white.

After leaving them, Lord Robins crossed in front of the fire to lead Alice to greet Mrs. Fudge. In so doing, he brought them close to Lord Brooks, who still leaned against the hearth.

"Good evening, my lord," Alice said with a small incline of her head. She had looked through a few of her father's things only that evening but had yet to learn why Lord Brooks held her in such ill favor.

"Good evening," he replied, his tone cold, especially when compared to the warmth of the fire beside him.

With no more than that, Lord Robins began to lead her past him and toward the elderly woman whom Alice had yet to meet. Just as she was about to move past Lord Brooks, however, she remembered the wrapped books in her arms.

"Oh, begging your pardon," she said, tugging on Lord Robins's arm for him to stop. She turned once more to Lord Brooks. "I nearly forgot." Alice extended the package toward him. "My cousin wished for me to deliver these to you, since he was unable to do so himself tonight."

"Yes, we were all quite saddened to hear he was away tonight," Lord Robins said.

Lord Brooks, for his part, simply accepted the package without saying anything.

Alice waited for him to respond, but he didn't. She'd hoped he'd mutter some appreciation, or even acknowledgment. She wasn't sure why she'd felt such a need to help him any way she could, but it was an urge she hadn't been able to shake off.

When he still refused to say anything, or even soften his scowl her direction, Alice chose to respond to Lord Robins. "He had some business to see to. But Mr. Allen will be back in a few days."

"Perhaps we'll see him again at Greenbulls?" Lord Robins asked, directing his question toward his friend.

“Perhaps,” was all Lord Brooks said.

With that, Lord Robins once more directed Alice toward Mrs. Fudge, and she fell into step beside him.

“May I ask,” Alice spoke to Lord Robins in a whisper, “why Lord Brooks dislikes me so very much?”

Lord Robins slowed his pace, giving them more time to talk before reaching the elderly lady. “Do you not know?”

Alice shook her head. “No.”

“Well, I don’t know the whole of it, but I believe it has something to do with history shared between my friend and your father.”

That wasn’t helpful. “But, what of the particulars?” Surely he knew more than just that.

Lord Robins patted her hand atop his arm. “I doubt very much they are for a lady to hear. Do not trouble yourself; my friend will not bother you while I’m around.”

Alice struggled to keep her face pleasant. Not for a lady to hear? Wouldn’t bother her while *he* was around? What rot. She’d been seeing to her many estates and much land for over a year now—if that wasn’t proof she could hear of an ill-conceived business plan, then she didn’t know what was.

More still, she’d given birth to a baby. She doubted very much that a pampered popinjay such as Lord Robins could have endured something so very trying. If he had half a notion of who she was or what she’d experienced in her life, he would think twice before pronouncing himself her knight.

Alice planted her smile firmly in place; no matter that she strongly disagreed with Lord Robins, now was not the time to take him to task. They reached the far side of the room where the elderly lady was sitting, Mrs. Dowding now by her side.

“Mrs. Fudge, may I make known to you Lady Nightingale, currently of Evergreen Cottage.”

“It is a great pleasure to make your acquaintance,” Alice said with a curtsy.

“Lady Nightingale,” Mrs. Fudge said, her tone warm, “I have been quite itching to meet you ever since I heard of your arrival.”

Itching to meet her? It was as unusual a turn of phrase as it was descriptive.

“And I you, Mrs. Fudge,” Alice said.

“Oh, no one calls me that. I’m Aunt Margarette, please.”

“If I didn’t know any better,” Lord Robins said in a fake whisper while leaning in closer to Alice, “I’d say she goes by that to avoid her absurd last name.”

“I’ll have you know,” Mrs. Fudge—or rather, Aunt Margarette—said, folding her fan and swatting Lord Robins in the thigh with it,

“that ‘Fudge’ is quite a respectable name, dating back as far as William the Conqueror, or so my late husband always insisted.” The woman sat back in her seat and faced Alice, her voice turning merry. “But between you and me, I am imminently glad he had a pleasing given name. I’m not sure I ever would have fallen in love with him if he had *two* ridiculous names. Could you imagine? Suppose he’d been a ‘Cornelius,’ or something equally horrifying?” The elderly woman giggled, putting a hand to her mouth.

Alice found herself laughing along, as did Lord Robins and Mrs. Dowding.

Almost without realizing what she was doing, Alice glanced over her shoulder. Lord Brooks was still watching her, the books in his hand still wrapped and tied with twine. His scowl hadn’t lessened, and yet it didn’t *feel* as hard.

“Excuse me, everyone,” Aunt Margarette said, standing up and speaking to the room at large. “Dinner is served, and I hope you don’t mind, but we always dine informally here at Cresthearth.”

Alice turned back toward the elderly woman and just caught sight of a manservant striding away. She’d not even noticed he’d entered the room, so caught up had she been in Lord Brooks’s puzzling expression.

“Shall we?” Lord Robins asked her.

Alice nodded her consent and together they made their way toward the dining room, falling in line just behind Lord Parsons, who led Miss Turner, while Mr. Turner walked beside Aunt Margarette just in front of them.

Lord Parsons said something to Miss Turner, and she laughed lightly.

“I rather hope so,” she said, her words growing just loud enough for Alice to hear. “Otherwise, I might look frightfully out of place.”

Lord Parsons drew her in a bit closer to him. “You could never look out of place or frightful, no matter how hard you tried.”

Even from where she stood, a few paces behind the couple, Alice could see Miss Turner’s blush—and her pleased smile.

A small ache started in Alice’s chest at the sight. She’d gathered that Lord Parsons was soft on Miss Turner, but she hadn’t realized that both their feelings ran far deeper than a strong regard.

What would that be like, to be wanted? To be sought out and preferred over all other company?

“Are you finding Carlaby to your liking, Lady Nightingale?” Lord Robins’s question forced her back to the present.

“Yes, I am,” she replied. It was a proper, respectable answer, but not one that encouraged a greater acquaintance. And suddenly, she quite wanted that closer acquaintance. Not with Lord Robins, per se,

but with someone. She was tired of always being ‘Lady Nightingale,’ of always being so aloof and unaffected. She wanted to be ‘Alice’ to someone. She loved Mr. and Mrs. Clarke dearly, but they were still in her employ. She had Joseph; he was her everything and more dear to her than she could ever express. But was it wrong that she wanted someone else in her life as well? Someone who would walk beside her, someone who would speak with her and listen in his turn?

“My lady?”

Alice blinked. Lord Robins was holding out her chair for her. They’d already reached the dinner table. Gracious, what a woolgathering ninny she was being tonight.

“Thank you,” she said, sitting in the offered chair.

He took the seat directly beside her, and soon the food was brought out. Lord Robins kept up a happy stream of questions and comments. Alice, for her part, did her best to stay attentive, but for whatever reason, her mind was not content to stay at the dinner table and insisted on roaming far more than was usual.

Perhaps attending tonight had been a mistake. It was becoming more and more clear, as the evening wore on, that there was little here for her. Her search for a new husband was not progressing while among this company.

Chapter 7



AFTER DINNER ENDED, Aunt Margarette stood and led the women into the drawing room. Alice walked last in line, her mood having not lifted all through dinner despite the delightful mutton and cooked carrots.

More now than at any time she could remember, Alice wished for a friend.

Someone of her same status and nearly her same age. Someone to whom she could speak of her life experiences and have him understand, for his were not so very different. Alice's steps slowed and she rubbed one arm with a hand. It seemed Joseph's constant asking for a papa was finally rubbing off on her.

She wanted a husband.

Alice shut her eyes, drew in a deep breath, and slowly pushed it out. Now that dinner was over, she only needed to stay a little past the time when the gentlemen joined the ladies and then she could excuse herself without appearing overly anxious to depart. She opened her eyes once more and realized she'd stopped in her tracks, the other ladies having disappeared into a room just down the corridor and off to her left.

Alice pinched her lips to the side; did she really have to go in just now? She hadn't anything against the other women here tonight. The misses Dowding were everything sweet and demure. Mrs. Turner and her daughter were a bit more talkative but also very kind. Aunt Margarette was witty and vivacious, no matter that her age seemed determined to make itself known whenever she stood, sat, or generally moved too much.

Still, Alice couldn't seem to find it in herself to grow excited over the evening. She was so tired of always being the elegant Lady Nightingale—the widow whose deportment was always graceful, whose conversation was always proper and polite and . . . boring.

Off to her right was a door left slightly ajar. She pressed a few fingertips to it. The cold, hard wood gave at the light pressure, noiselessly swinging open. Perhaps if she took just a few minutes to herself, a small measure of time with which she might rally her spirits once again.

The room was mostly dark, but the embers of a fire in the hearth lit the space enough that she could move through it without hitting the various chairs and small, circular tables beside them. The room was lined with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves on either wall to Alice's right and left. The wall directly behind her held the large hearth, the wall directly in front of her, tall, curtained windows.

A library, it would seem. She probably could have guessed even if the fire did not cast off enough light, for the whole room smelled of old paper and ink. Alice moved toward a bookshelf, running her fingers along the spines. Vanilla and musk. She reached the end of the row and stood before the first window. The curtain was dark in color, but not enough light reached this corner of the room for her to tell the shade. She wrapped a hand around the thick, velvety fabric and pulled it back.

Cold air, trapped between the window and curtain, cascaded over her, pinching at her cheeks and settling against her neck and chest. It wasn't snowing now, but the sky was quite overcast. Another good reason to make her excuses early and return home soon.

With any luck, she and Joseph would awake to a white world. Perhaps there would even be enough snow for a snowman. Some of her best childhood memories involved snowmen, or ice skating, or sleigh rides. She hoped, this winter, to share so many of those same memories—

"I have a copy in here." A deep masculine voice cause Alice to whirl around.

The library door swung open. Two gentlemen stood in the doorway, backlit by the light pouring in from the corridor.

What would they say when they found her in a room she hadn't been invited into, all alone and in a dark corner? Alice dropped to her knees behind a large, upholstered chair; hopefully she would never have to find out.



Isaac turned toward the bookshelf where he was certain he'd seen *Pride and Prejudice.* He quickly scanned over the various titles.

"This is excellent," Parsons said from just behind him. "I knew Miss Turner thoroughly enjoyed *Sense and Sensibility*, but it never occurred to me to ask your aunt if she had another book by the same author."

Isaac found the book they were seeking and pulled it out. He turned to hand it to his friend and, in the process, noticed a bit of fabric sticking out from behind one of the larger chairs near the back corner. Despite the darkness, which was very deep indeed in the

corners of the room, he recognized the fabric immediately. It was the very fabric worn by the individual he'd been trying most to avoid all night, to not glance at every few minutes, to erase from his mind entirely.

What the blazes was Lady Nightingale doing hiding behind a chair in his aunt's library?

"Is that it?" Parsons reached for the book.

Isaac let him have it. "Yes, the very one."

"Thank you." Parsons turned toward the library door, taking long purposeful strides. "This will most certainly brighten Miss Turner's day." He paused at the door frame. "Are you not coming?"

Isaac's gaze jumped back to the small bit of fabric still peeking out from behind the chair. "No, you go ahead. I'm just going to . . . look over the shelves a bit more and see if there's anything else Miss Turner might enjoy."

Parsons threw him a casual salute and disappeared into the corridor.

Isaac took a step toward Lady Nightingale. Then a second one. For the life of him, he couldn't fathom why she was in here, and hiding, moreover. Every encounter he'd had with the widow proved her to be quite refined and a strict follower of social conventions. She was polite to everyone at all times. Her words were always well-spoken, if a bit like she was simply reading from a book handed to her by her governess. And yet, when he looked into her eyes, he could see there was far more going on inside her head than she ever let show. Isaac pitied the man who allowed himself to be pulled in by her charms, only to learn too late that he'd shackled himself to the most conniving of all women.

Then again, she'd offered his aunt a deep curtsy when they'd met. It wasn't anything much, but it showed more respect for his aunt than he'd expected to see from her. Lady Nightingale was a countess, a peer in her own right. His aunt was the widow of a gentleman, it was true, but he hadn't been an overly wealthy man nor a man of much power or high connections. Isaac had half-expected Lady Nightingale to snub the connection to his aunt. Instead, she'd treated his aunt with the same respect she gave everyone.

He stopped directly in front of her, then slowly turned and looked down at Lady Nightingale. She would probably lift her chin and excuse herself with no explanation at all. Either that, or she would call him a cad for instigating a situation where they were together, alone, in a room with no chaperone. Either way, he was ready. He wouldn't let her manipulate this situation to her benefit; he wouldn't let her bat her beautiful eyelashes and expect all to be forgiven and forgotten.

Not that stepping into the library uninvited was all that bad, but it

was inconsiderate. And after his aunt had treated her so kindly.

Instead of taking either of those actions, Lady Nightingale looked up at him, gave him a sheepish smile, lifted a hand, and waved her fingers at him.

"Good evening, Lord Brooks."

Good evening? That was all she had to say? And while she was sitting on the floor, pressed up against the back of a chair?

Despite his better judgment, Isaac held out a hand. "May I ask what about this spot on the floor has drawn you to it so completely?"

Her hand slipped into his.

A heat stole up his arm at her touch. It filled his chest and caused his stomach to roll as though suddenly filled with flapping, fluttering butterflies. Lady Nightingale stood; since he'd helped her stand, she was much closer to him now than they'd ever been to one another before.

She was tall for a woman, the top of her head coming nearly to his eyebrows. She smelled good, too. A sweet mixture of rosewater and vanilla. Though, it was more likely the vanilla scent was coming from the books filling the room.

"Would you believe me if I told you I got lost on my way to the drawing room?"

"No, my lady," Isaac said, his own voice sounding harder with each word. "I would not."



Of course he wouldn't believe she'd simply gotten lost. Lord Brooks was nothing if not set against her at all times.

He dropped her hand, and cold air rushed in against her fingers. Now that the connection was lost, she realized how much she'd enjoyed it. Though why, she couldn't say. It was clear Lord Brooks had offered to help her stand purely because he was a gentleman and had been raised to act honorably. It certainly wasn't because he was suddenly going soft on her.

He was undeniably handsome, and the shadows of the room only emphasized his broad shoulders, firm jaw . . . and his scowl. Why must he always scowl at her? She'd seen him smile while at Greenbulls. Just the memory made her stomach flip, and she knew an urge to rub her thumb over his forehead and smooth away the discontent there.

Alice almost laughed aloud at the random thought—and at the surprise she imagined would no doubt replace Lord Brooks's scowl if she ever tried such a thing.

He must have noticed her suppressed laughter for his head tilted

ever so slightly to the side.

"Of a truth," Lord Brooks continued, placing both his hands behind his back, "I don't believe you *ever* get lost. You strike me as the kind of woman who always knows where she is headed and how to get there."

His assessment of her was astonishing. She *wished* she was the woman he described.

Alice met his gaze. What did she care what Lord Brooks thought of her? He was determined to find fault in all she did, so why bother trying to be all polite and proper? More still, there was something alluring in his constant authenticity. He disliked her, and he showed it. The other day at Greenbulls, he'd enjoyed the company of his friends, and he'd shown that, too. The few times Alice had interacted with Lord Brooks had been enough to prove him the kind of man who was forthright in all he did.

His honesty of character was something she craved. If only she could be that way herself.

Perhaps, with him, she could be. After all, it wasn't as though she was going to lower his opinion of her. What did she have to lose?

"Very well," she said. "If you must know, I came in here to find a moment's peace."

He eyed her as though trying to divine if she spoke the truth.

"You danced nearly every set at the assembly not ten days ago. Don't tell me a small, intimate dinner party is now suddenly too much for you."

There was a bit of a challenge in his tone, and it sent a thrill shooting through her. "Why, Lord Brooks," she said with a light laugh. "I had no idea you had been so aware of my path through the ballroom that night."

Lord Brooks dropped his gaze. Was he embarrassed for her to learn he'd watched her at the assembly? It wasn't as though she was going to misread his intent; she knew from experience that it was hard *not* to keep track of someone you intently disliked.

Still, she wished to put him back at ease. "It was a lovely assembly. Enough dancers to be enjoyable, but not so many that the room was overly packed."

"With as cold as it has been this winter, I think the room could have been far fuller and it still wouldn't have turned too hot."

He had a point. "There are benefits to holding a dance during the winter."

"But a wintertime dinner party *isn't* to your liking?"

"Please don't misunderstand," she said, though she wasn't at all confident he wouldn't. Nonetheless, she found she sincerely wished he would hear her out. "Everything tonight has been most pleasing. The

food, the company—"

"Including Robins?"

His friend who had spent the majority of the meal not so subtly asking after her wealth? "Yes, even him." For all his lack of tact, Lord Robins did seem a nice enough man at heart. "Though I am afraid if he continues on, I shall have to disappoint him." The moment the words had left her mouth, she wished them back.

She'd simply gotten caught up in being open and free to speak her mind.

Lord Brooks folded his arms, his permanent scowl deepening. "Is that so? And may I ask what about Robins is so beneath you?"

Alice threw her hands up. Blast Lord Brooks and his purposeful determination to find fault with her. "He is not beneath me. Only . . ." She glanced away, her gaze going instead to the towering bookshelf behind him. "Only, I don't care to be part of yet another marriage where my husband only wants me for my money."

It was strange to speak the words aloud, particularly to Lord Brooks.

On the one hand, it felt good—a relief, even—to have said as much. It was a weight off her chest to have shared such a truth instead of leaving it to twist about only in her head as she had always done before.

On the other hand, she knew no sympathy would come from Lord Brooks. He wasn't a longstanding friend upon whom she could depend for support. He wasn't a shoulder to cry on when things got overwhelming. He was the only single man in all the county who would never seek a connection with her—as a friend or as anything more.

In a way, it was liberating knowing that. Since he would never make designs on her, why should she care what he thought about her words?

Let him take her words however he may. She was glad she'd said them to *someone*.

However, now, the silence between them was quickly growing strained.

"I believe I ought to return to the drawing room," Alice said with a small curtsy. She strode toward the door, but he didn't follow. Just before passing into the corridor, she turned back around.

Lord Brooks stood where she'd left him, though the room was too dark for her to know from this distance if he still scowled or not. He probably did. His form was completely still, so he was probably finding ways to twist her few honest words against her.

Alice shook her head and left him to his judgment and scowling. After all, she had a dinner party to bow out of and a son to get home

to.

Dear Amelie

Cresthearth Manor, Carlaby
December 12th, 1815

My heart goes out to you; why do granddaughters and grandnephews have to cause so much grief? Yes, I have heard of the mysterious "missing marquess," and I hope, for your sake, he makes his appearance soon. As for the farm boy you wrote of, I further hope that he is of an honorable disposition. Oh, how I wish I was there with you so that we might better assess the situation in person. Know you have all my love and prayers.

As for life at Cresthearth Manor, what can I say except I have barely entered into my matchmaking plans and already I am full of doubts.

My nephew and his friends have decided to stay longer than they originally planned—a relief, I can promise you. What had he been thinking, showing up only to announce he was staying no more than a couple of weeks? How can a great aunt successfully find love for him in so short a time? You can imagine my relief when Lord Brooks and his two friends declared they needed more time in Carlaby. They have decided to stay through Twelfth Night, so I have that long, at least.

However, no sooner was that concern laid to rest then another was forced upon my mind. The young woman I had planned for my nephew seems to have not caught his eye at all. Indeed, the bacon-brained man is so wrapped up in his discontent over another lady that he seems quite blind to all others. This is a problem I did not foresee.

Do not tell the others though, please? I am thrilled to learn that I am not the only one matchmaking this Christmas, but now I am terrified I shall be the only one who is unsuccessful!

I must find a way to get Lord Brooks to notice someone *other* than Lady Nightingale. Wish me luck! I will be sending many wishes your way as well.

Your dear friend,
Margarette Fudge

Chapter 8



ALICE RESTED BACK in the large chair which nearly swallowed her up and surveyed the half-empty Greenbulls before her. There weren't nearly as many gentlemen here today as there had been the past few times she'd come. Still, a few of the men she'd been keeping an eye on *were* here.

There was Lord Sempill and Mr. Wilds, both of whom she'd met since coming to Carlaby. Then there was Lord Gulliver and Mr. Worsley, two of the three gentlemen she'd known from before her marriage to Lord Hoskins.

Currently, the four gentlemen she was secretly keeping watch over were standing in very nearly the four corners of the room. She had to keep her head on a swivel to keep track of them all. They certainly weren't making this easy for her.

Alice crossed one ankle over her knee. Perhaps she ought to go join one of the men in conversation. Wouldn't it be better for her to learn, for certain, if one man was worthy of her affection or not, than to sit here all afternoon watching the four men but never learning a substantial thing about any of them?

Yes, sitting here was not going to garner her any insight. She moved to stand, only to hesitate, her gaze on the way her legs were crossed. It was a decidedly masculine act, one she'd practiced at home many times. Body language was as important as her looks and expressions, Mr. Clarke had taught her. Yet, she'd crossed her ankle over her knee this time almost without realizing it.

It was strange, as it was something she never would have done a month ago—something she wasn't even sure was possible in a long, proper skirt. Alice shook her head and placed both feet on the floor. Acting as a man was starting to get to her, starting to change her.

And she wasn't sure if it was a good change or not.

Alice strode across the room toward Lord Gulliver, who sat at a table with several other men. They appeared to be engaged in a game of whist. Alice's stomach eased a bit—at least here was a game she was quite familiar with. She drew nearer as several other gentlemen did the same. There was an atmosphere to the game, a sense of intensity in the way the other onlookers watched each card played.

More men joined the circle, including Mr. Wilds. Alice turned her direction slightly and came to stand shoulder to shoulder with him.

"Appears to be an interesting game," Alice said, careful to keep her voice low.

Mr. Wilds nodded. "Did you hear the stakes?"

Alice shook her head. The motion sent her glasses down her nose ever so slightly. Alice pushed them back into place. If she'd known how tiresome the spectacles would prove to be, she never would have donned them in the first place.

He leaned in slightly, lowering his voice, she supposed so as to not distract the players. "They've put five thousand pounds on the line."

"They what?" Alice couldn't help the outburst.

Mr. Wilds chuckled and nodded his agreement. "A hefty sum, even for someone like Gulliver."

Alice's heart fell. "Does Lord Gulliver play for such high sums often?" The man in question was bent over his hand of cards, his expression one of a man deep in concentration.

"Does Gulliver—?" Mr. Wilds broke off and laughed. "I nearly forgot. You're new to Carlaby. I'll give you a bit of a friendly warning. Gulliver plays *only* for high stakes."

"Does he normally win?"

Mr. Wilds shrugged. "He claims he does. But between you and me . . ." Mr. Wilds shook his head.

Well, then, that was all she needed to know. Alice rubbed the top of her father's walking stick. She had no desire to connect herself with a man who would gamble away everything she owned. Moreover, judging by the way Gulliver's face was growing red and his eyes were bugging out, he was not going to give up gambling any time soon. He showed all the signs of a man addicted.

"And what about you?" she asked Mr. Wilds. "Will you join them when a seat opens?"

"Oh, no. I prefer to find my entertainment elsewhere."

Alice wasn't sure what he meant by that, but a slippery, slithering suspicion ran down her spine. "And what do you prefer?"

A smile crossed Lord Wild's face, but it wasn't a pleasant one. He leaned closer toward her, dropping his voice low. "The *shapely* kind." He made an hourglass shape with his hands.

Ah.

Everyone at the card table suddenly cried out—some in cheers, others in dismay. Alice hadn't seen what happened, but Lord Gulliver's voice rose above the rest, releasing a long stream of curses aimed at his opponents and a few at his own team member.

Alice chose to use the distraction to make her escape, and she turned and walked away just as one of the other men at the table

tossed a card down. She shook her head as she turned her back on Lord Gulliver and Mr. Wilds—two men she most certainly would not be encouraging after today.

Lord Brooks sat in the same chair he'd been in last week when Alice had first visited the club. He had a paper up in front of his face, again, but she got the distinct impression he was aware of her presence all the same.

She opened her mouth to ask how the rest of the dinner party had gone the other evening after she'd left . . . and only stopped herself barely in time. Lady Nightingale had attended the dinner party, not Mr. Allen.

And yet, she found herself wishing for an excuse to sit down in the chair beside Lord Brooks and begin a conversation.

She didn't have an excuse. There wasn't a reason she could possibly think of that would justify the act. Moreover, he'd made his dislike for both Lady Nightingale and Mr. Allen clear. But, strangely enough, she'd quite enjoyed those few minutes alone with him in the library. They hadn't shared anything particularly personal or even jovial, and yet she found herself replaying that brief moment over and over in her mind. The honesty of the conversation had been refreshing—and she craved such honesty again.

But it was clear from the way Lord Brooks kept the paper up that he didn't care to further their acquaintance. Alice turned; perhaps she'd try to strike up a conversation with Lord Sempill.

"Mr. Allen."

Alice paused at Lord Brooks's words, half-wondering if she hadn't imagined them. Slowly, she turned back around.

"I suppose," he continued, his words drawn out as if he already regretted saying them, "I ought to thank you for the books your cousin brought me the other day."

Alice faced him once more, clutching her hands behind her back. "I only hope they are proving useful."

"They are." He folded the paper and rested it against his knee.

Alice stepped forward and took the seat next to him. "May I speak frankly?" She purposely kept her body language masculine, resting her elbows against her knees and leaning on them. When Lord Brooks didn't tell her she couldn't be frank, she continued. "How long are you going to hold my connection with the late Mr. Grant against me?" It was a question she wished she could ask as Lady Nightingale, but this would have to do.

He eyed her suspiciously but still didn't respond.

"Would you like me better if I told you I also disliked Mr. Grant?" she asked.

"I didn't just *dislike* him. I loathed the man. Still do."

Alice leaned back in her chair. “Perhaps you should tell me why.”

“Perhaps you should ask your cousin.”

“Perhaps she can’t tell me.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

And there was the open honesty she’d been wanting. Strange how good it felt. Alice shrugged and tried to hide her smile. “Would it surprise you if I said we don’t talk often?”

He watched her for a moment, and she could see his mind mulling over what she’d just said. At length, he spoke. “I had rather begun to wonder. I’ve never seen the two of you out together in public.”

She had been wondering when someone was going to bring that up. “Let’s just say that us being out together in public tends to get . . . awkward.”

“For whom? You or her?”

“Mostly for anyone else there with us.” She almost chuckled at her double meaning. Just imagine what others would feel if she were both Lady Nightingale and Mr. Allen at the same time. Awkward, indeed.

Lord Brooks continued to watch her closely. “You two aren’t much alike, are you?”

“I am as you see me.” The truth was far more complex. She was very much herself when she was Mr. Allen, almost more so than when she was Lady Nightingale. But she supposed that the part of her that she showed when being one was quite different from the part of her that she showed when being the other.

“Why then,” Lord Brooks asked, “do you care about how your late uncle acted toward me?”

“Curiosity,” Alice said without hesitation.

“Are you curious often, then, Mr. Allen?”

Was she ever. Alice pointed to her own face. “As often as I get a new freckle.” And, like her freckles, first her father and then her late husband had tried to end her constant questioning and desire to learn. But she was who she was, a freckled, curious woman . . . presently pretending to be a man.

“But why turn your curiosity toward me?” Lord Brooks pressed.

“I must find *some* friends while I’m staying in Carlaby, mustn’t I?”

“And you hope to find a friend in me?”

“Are you suggesting you wouldn’t make a good friend?” Why in heaven’s name was he so fun to goad? “Because I can assure you, I am an excellent friend. Besides, if you can’t trust the distant nephew of your worst enemy, who can you trust?”

Finally, a smile broke through across Lord Brooks’s face. Alice’s heart did a strange flip, one that left her feeling quite warm.

“All right, then.” Lord Brooks shifted in his chair, angling around to face her better. “My mother passed when I was barely out of

leading strings. My father joined her when I was only fourteen."

So young. Her heart ached for that boy.

"I had no other uncles or grandfathers," Lord Brooks continued. "So at a very young age, I was expected to run my father's many holdings."

"But surely there was a man of business you could rely on?" Alice had fiercely depended upon her late husband's man of business since his passing.

"There was a man, one I *thought* I could trust. But I was impressionable and foolish."

"You were young."

"Yes, well, Mr. Grant took advantage all the same. He acted quite sorrowful at the death of my father, claimed he would take me under his wing. After a few months of seeing each other regularly, he suggested I had too many lands to manage. He said he'd looked over things with my man of business and one estate in particular was more of a drain than anything. He offered to take it off my hands, to 'save' me from the destruction the estate would surely bring me."

Alice had a sinking feeling she knew where this was headed. "He paid you a very small sum for a very profitable estate."

Lord Brooks nodded. "It wasn't until I attended University that I went back and reviewed the actual numbers." His gaze met hers. "He paid me less than one tenth of what that piece of land is worth today."

That sounded like something her father would have done. Yet another sickening plot carried out behind the eyes of society. "What of your man of business? Why did he not stop you?"

"I did some digging after I realized I'd been taken in. Turns out my man of business had been paid off by Mr. Grant to hoodwink me. I threw him out, of course, but this was years after the fact, and there was little that could be done."

Alice stretched her fingers out, wanting to place a hand against his arm or shoulder, wanting to reassure him that all was not lost. She stopped herself, curling her fingers back in and resting her fist against the arm rest.

"Which estate was it?" Alice asked instead.

"Langdon Hall."

"The estate near Kent?"

"The very one."

She'd been there only a few months ago. It was a most profitable estate, indeed. One of the best she'd inherited from either her father or her husband. "Then I am sorry to hear it."

Lord Brooks tossed his folded paper onto a side table. "Let us talk about more enjoyable things. I don't like to hold onto the past."

"Oh?" Alice said, unable to keep all the challenge out of her tone.

“Is that why you insist on scowling at her ladyship whenever you are both in the same room?”

“Ah, she’s told you then?”

“She may have mentioned it in passing.” Talking about herself as though she were someone else was getting easier. It was yet another odd change that Alice wasn’t sure was a good thing or not. This change, however, at least helped protect her secret.

“I suppose it is not so very gentlemanly of me, but I don’t care to be bamboozled by another Grant.”

“You think her just like her father?” What a disheartening thought.

“Unlike you, she has Mr. Grant’s blood in her veins. So yes, I don’t deny that I am wary when it comes to her. And then there’s that look I see in her eyes.”

Alice’s face went from lukewarm to blazing hot. A heady awareness spread through her. “Excuse me?” What look in her eye? What did that even mean?

Lord Brooks shook his head. “Forget I even said it.”

Not a chance. “You can’t say something like that about a man’s cousin and then not explain.” And did he see the same thing in Mr. Allen’s eyes?

Did he *like* what he saw in her eyes?

“I don’t know,” Lord Brooks said. “Only, I can’t shake the feeling that she’s smarter than the gentlemen in this room give her credit for . . .”

The compliment went straight to Alice’s heart.

“. . . and that she’s only here in Carlaby to pull the wool over on some unsuspecting chap.”

And the thrill of his earlier compliment withered and died.

But could she blame him? After all her father had done to him? It wasn’t as though Lord Brooks knew her well enough to see how different she was from her progenitor. His suspicions were justified.

“It is rather a surprise,” she said, “knowing all this, that you invited her to your aunt’s for dinner the other night.”

“That was all Robins’s doing. Parsons, Robins, and I are staying with Aunt Margarette so that Parsons may continue an acquaintance with a young woman he met earlier this year during the Season. But just as soon as things are settled between them, I will need to return to London.”

“Oh?”

Lord Brooks shrugged, his mouth turning into a lopsided grin. He was quite handsome when he was slightly embarrassed. “I need to find a wife as well. One with a large enough dowry to save what is left of my inheritance.” He shook his head, slouching a bit in his chair. “I’ve done everything possible to keep my holdings afloat. I learned a

lot at University, I've retrenched and invested, I've spoken with those doing better than me and consulted every farmer I have in my employ."

She could see the years of hard work in his expression. "But it hasn't been enough."

"No. Truth is, if I hadn't sold Langdon Hall to Mr. Grant, I probably would be just fine. But with it gone, and so little capital coming from the sale of it, things haven't been good since."

"I am sorry to hear it."

He shrugged. "My aunt keeps going on and on about marrying for love, but I don't think she fully grasps the nature of my situation."

So he, too, was a fortune hunter. In the past, she'd disregarded each and every man wanting to marry strictly for money. Yet, this time, there was more than a hint of disappointment in the realization.

Alice placed an ankle atop her knee, smiling ruefully when she caught herself in the act. For better or for worse, she was fully entrenched in being Mr. Allen. "Tell me about your time at university."

"Did you not attend?"

"You forget, I am the distant cousin of Lady Nightingale—from the poorest side of her family." A small, but important part of Mr. Allen's history. If he came from a poor side of the family, it helped justify why no one had heard of him before now.

"I see."

Alice suddenly found she didn't want him thinking her—or thinking Mr. Allen—was uneducated or unintelligent. "I didn't attend University," she said, "but I have read extensively, and I supplement that with stimulating conversation whenever I can find it."

Lord Brooks gave her a full smile, and good heavens but it made her warm from head to toe.

He clapped her on the shoulder. "I can respect a man who takes control of his life and makes the most of it." Though he said it to Mr. Allen, Alice liked to think he'd have said the same thing even if he had known she was a woman. Though, he might not have been quite so forceful with his hand against her shoulder. It hadn't hurt, but it was still a new experience. All the more so because of the heated awareness that spread from where his hand rested on her.

"Thank you," she said, unable to hold back her own smile. "I must confess I have worked hard to get where I am now and it's nice to have the hard work appreciated, not just the success."

"What do you want to know about my time at university?"

Strange, but though she was Mr. Allen now, she found speaking with Lord Brooks still availed her the opportunity to freely express herself. Further proof that it wasn't the situation she'd found herself in

before but being with *him* that gave her the sense of freedom.

Ready to hear all about the privilege she'd have loved to have had if only she'd not been born a woman, Alice settled into her chair and got comfortable. "Tell me everything."

Chapter 9



ISAAC HURRIED DOWN THE STAIRS. Parsons had gone to call on Miss Turner this morning, again. Robins hadn't joined them for breakfast, but he'd been up late last night trying to win some money off Lord Gulliver, who, they'd learned since coming to Carlaby, was forever losing more than he was winning. Isaac could only hope his friend hadn't also lost more than he could afford. Robins wasn't usually one to try his luck at a serious wager, but he'd been growing restless these past several days. It seemed though he continued to call on Lady Nightingale often enough, she'd seen through his attempts to woo her and wasn't showing any signs of interest in return.

Isaac entered the drawing room. The soft morning light filtered through the windows, showcasing the thick blanket of snow outside. It seemed they had finally gotten the snow they'd all been expecting for almost a week now.

"Good morning, Isaac."

He turned and found Aunt Margarette sitting beside the fire, a bit of needlepoint in her hands and thin-rimmed glasses perched atop the end of her nose.

"Good morning, Aunt." He crossed to her and placed a kiss on her cheek.

"Did you sleep well?"

"Yes," he said, taking a seat across from her. "Quite well. How about yourself?"

"As well as I ever do these days," she said with a telling smile. "Now, what are your plans for today?"

Isaac shrugged. "Perhaps Greenbulls."

"Again?" No one could have missed the dismay in her tone. "You've been there nearly every day for over a week now."

Had he? Now that he thought about it, his aunt had the right of it. Ever since he and Mr. Allen had settled the differences between them, he'd found he quite enjoyed sitting with the chap, talking away the afternoon. He was a good man, one with a sound head and intelligent ideas. But not all stuffy and self-important.

"Would you rather I stay here this afternoon?" he asked. They were only visiting his aunt until Parsons could offer for Miss Turner.

This wasn't a true house party; more just a couple of bachelors spending a bit of time together in the country. Still, he'd hate for his aunt to feel neglected.

"No," Aunt Margarette said, picking up her needlepoint once more. "But I had thought it might be a good day for you to go calling."

"Calling?"

"Yes. Perhaps on Miss Dowding."

So she hadn't given up on such ideas. Isaac leaned back, his eyes roving toward the ceiling. It wasn't a bad idea. Miss Dowding was rumored to be in possession of a large dowry, though he hadn't ever heard the exact amount. She was pretty, soft-spoken. Had never done or said anything that irked him. He glanced toward the windows; the snow had started falling again, large soft flakes gently winding their way toward the ground. The beauty of it called to him. Today was not a day to stay indoors.

Perhaps he should go call on Miss Dowding. He hadn't anything better to do.

Suppose he rode by Evergreen Cottage first to see if Mr. Allen wished to join him? Isaac placed both feet on the floor and leaned forward, suddenly very excited by the idea. He and Mr. Allen had been discussing new advances in the use of cotton yesterday, and then Isaac had found an article on the very topic in the paper that morning. He'd been hoping to share it with Mr. Allen anyways. What better time than when riding together to call on Miss Dowding?

Isaac stood. "I think I shall. I believe going calling would be just the thing on a morning such as this."

Aunt Margarette smiled down at her work. "Don't you worry about me. I'm quite content by this fire. You go and have a long, lovely visit with Miss Dowding."

Isaac gave her another quick kiss on the cheek, not bothering to explain that he'd be stopping by Evergreen Cottage first, and then hurried from the room.



The snow fell softly around him. It was indeed a fine winter day to be out of doors. Though it was cold enough to snow, it wasn't so cold as to be frigid. It was more brisk than anything.

Isaac's horse plodded along comfortably, and they turned off the road and headed down toward Evergreen Cottage. His twice-capped great coat kept him plenty warm, as did his thick gloves and breeches. The cottage came into view. It was large for being called a cottage, yet he didn't doubt it was one of the smaller holdings of Lady Nightingale. Still, no matter it's size, it *felt* like a cottage. There was a warmth to

the brick exterior, to the way vines climbed up the front, and the windows all exuded light as though to welcome weary travelers from near and far.

Was it any wonder Mr. Allen had chosen to stay here, despite having to share a home with his cousin? Isaac hadn't been able to fully distinguish how Mr. Allen felt about Lady Nightingale, but they never attended events together. More still, Mr. Allen often avoided talking about her altogether, often changing the subject whenever Isaac brought her up. Best he could tell, they tolerated one another, but there was no great connection between the two.

The cry of an overly excited dog brought Isaac's gaze toward the far side of the house. A small dog came bounding over the snow toward him. He had squares of fabric wrapped and tied about his feet and what looked almost like a small coat covering most of his back. He reached Isaac's horse, who only snorted at the dog's constant yipping. Seeing the dog up close, it was clear he was small because he was young, probably not even a year old yet.

"You look too young to be out here by yourself." Even with the dog's coat, Isaac could tell by the brown and white coloring on his face that he was a spaniel.

The dog barked again, then took off once more, heading back the direction he'd come.

Isaac angled his horse around, following the dog around the far side of the house. As he rounded the corner, the sound of laughter met him.

There, bundled in a dark brown coat was a little boy, curly hair poking out from beneath a knitted cap. His hands were full of snow, recently scooped up, and he hurried over to a large pile and packed it on. Only, it wasn't a pile of snow—it was a snowman. The little boy patted on the snow he'd held and then bent down to scoop up more.

"Add some more to the bottom." Lady Nightingale poked her head out from around the snowman, pointing to the base. "That way he won't fall over."

Her auburn hair was tucked up beneath what looked to be a very warm bonnet. She wore a pelisse of deep plum, with a primrose yellow scarf wrapped about her neck. Her nose was nearly the color of a few short strands of hair falling out from beneath her bonnet near her temple.

She caught sight of him and froze. The young boy—undoubtedly the son Isaac had heard about—saw his mother still and turned toward him as well.

"Good day, Lady Nightingale."

She stood up straight, coming around from behind the snowman. "Good day to you, Lord Brooks."

The young boy, who barely came up to his horse's knees, looked up at Isaac, squinting against the sunlight. He smiled brightly and waved a hand covered in a thick mitten.

Lady Nightingale stepped forward, placing a hand on either of her son's shoulders. "This is my son, Lord Hoskins. Joseph," she said, looking down at the young boy, "this is Lord Brooks."

The boy waved again. "Are you a viscount too?"

"Lord Brooks is a baron," Lady Nightingale said in a kind voice. She shot Isaac an apologetic smile.

Isaac's heart stumbled in response. There was no denying that even after being in the cold, Lady Nightingale was quite beautiful. It was a fact he'd tried hard to ignore. But as of late, since he and Mr. Allen had become friends, truth be told, he'd begun to wonder if he hadn't misjudged Lady Nightingale.

He still didn't trust her, not fully. Her eyes appeared far too sharp. But he was . . . curious, all the same.

"We're building a snowman," Lord Hoskins blurted out. He waved a hand in the direction of their creation.

Isaac never would have guessed Lady Nightingale would be the type to play in the snow, even with her son. It was yet another small fact that didn't line up with the woman Isaac had thus far expected her to be.

"Then I shall not detain you long," Isaac said to the boy. He turned to his mother. "I have only come in the hopes that Mr. Allen would accompany me on a visit this morning."

"Oh, did you?" Lady Nightingale asked.

"Who?" her son said, looking up at her.

She patted him on the shoulder. "How about you pack some more snow over there?" She pointed to a spot near the base. "I'd hate for him to tip over."

Her son bent down and scooped up snow once more, hurrying over to where his mother had indicated, and began packing as intensely as his little arms allowed.

Lady Nightingale took a few steps away from her son and moved closer to Isaac. "I'm sorry, but Mr. Allen is unavailable today."

"That's a shame." Isaac glanced over at the cottage; he'd truly been looking forward to riding with the man.

"Yes, he's wrapped up in business and asked not to be disturbed."

The man had already been away for a few days last week seeing to business, and now it was taking up all his time today. One of these days, Isaac would have to ask him the particulars of what kept him so occupied. Or perhaps he shouldn't. Some men could become quite self-conscious about their income, particularly when there wasn't much to be had.

“I’m sure he’ll be sad to hear he missed you,” Lady Nightingale said.

Isaac returned his gaze to her. “As I am sad he is otherwise busy today.”

“Are you?”

Her question surprised him. “Indeed. I have found your cousin to be quite a good conversationalist. I enjoy his company.”

Her smile seemed to warm at his comments. Was she the type of woman, then, who took pride in knowing her relations were well-liked by others? If so, it was rather a shame she was Mr. Grant’s daughter.

Isaac made to express his well wishes and farewell but hesitated before doing so. Without Mr. Allen joining him, the idea of calling on Miss Dowding suddenly held far less excitement. Did he even want to go? He could always turn around and return to Cresthearth, but what excuse would he give Aunt Margarette if he returned so soon after leaving?

“Is there anything else I can help you with?” Lady Nightingale asked after a minute of silence between them.

“No,” he said, wrapping his gloved fingers against the saddle horn. “It is only that I find myself rather on my own today. Parsons is calling on Miss Turner. And Robins was up so late last night that he had yet to appear when I left Cresthearth this morning. I was hoping to ride out with Mr. Allen, but . . .” He ended with a shrug.

Lord Hoskins stood up straight. “You can build a snowman with us.”

“Thank you,” Isaac said, unable to stop from smiling at the young boy’s generous offer. “But I am sure you two have it well in hand.” And he was sure Lady Nightingale wouldn’t care for his intrusion.

However, instead of sending him off, she took another step toward him. “You are free to join us if you care to.”

That was most unexpected. As was her soft smile and the encouraging look she gave him. She had the same nose and mouth as Mr. Allen, probably inherited from their shared grandparents. Though Lady Nightingale had not his freckles. Which was a shame. Isaac had always found freckles rather charming. If Lady Nightingale ever chose to go out without her bonnet, would she freckle as her cousin had?

The image his imagination produced at such a line of thought caused a tingling to spread from his stomach outward, down his arms and legs, and even up into his head.

Isaac shook himself. He had to stop staring. Where was his mind today?

“Thank you,” he said, and he almost declined . . . but he could not deny that Lady Nightingale had begun to intrigue him. “I would very much enjoy joining you both.” The words came out, surprising even

himself.

"Wonderful," Lady Nightingale said, stepping back as he dismounted. "I was beginning to worry I'd have to summon Mr. Clarke to lift the snowman's head into place. The one Joseph and I made is rather large."

Isaac walked around the tall mound of snow and found a large ball of packed snow sitting just behind it. It *was* a rather large head.

"I think for a head that size, the snowman needs to be taller."

At that statement, Lord Hoskins cheered. For the next hour, Isaac helped pack snow both at the base of the snowman and on the top. Lord Hoskins didn't stop chatting nearly the entire time while the young dog yipped and danced about them. As the base filled out, Isaac lifted Lord Hoskins up on his shoulder and let the boy pack more snow along the snowman's shoulders—or at least where they would be once the head was in place. After they were all pleased that the snowman's body was big enough to support such a grand head, he hoisted the large ball up on top and held it in place while Lady Nightingale moved around him, packing in snow around the neck so the head wouldn't fall off.

Her nearness brought back the tingling he'd felt before. He hated to admit it, but he believed he would have to rethink his original assessment of her. After all, Lord Hoskins was clearly being raised with love and attention. Otherwise, he would not exude such joy and openness.

And there was nothing in Lady Nightingale's manner or speech that showed her to think herself above others or to be conniving in any way. Then again, one look into her lovely green eyes and Isaac was reminded that if ever she did choose to fool him, he would never see it coming.

He shook his head and looked back toward Lord Hoskins, who appeared to be doing some kind of jig with his dog.

"What do you think?" he asked, his hands still around the snowman's head. "Will it stay if I let go?"

"Did you pack it tight, Mama?" the little boy asked Lady Nightingale.

"Perhaps you'd better come check and make sure I did." She beckoned her boy toward her. With a quick bend and scoop, she had him in her arms. The sight of the two, heads pressed as tightly together as her bonnet would allow, sent a yearning pounding in his heart—a desire he hadn't known was there until that moment. Lady Nightingale slowly circled around the snowman as she and her son inspected her packing job.

They neared him and the pounding grew, sending waves of hot awareness through him. Lady Nightingale lifted a finger and pointed

to a spot, speaking in a low voice with Lord Hoskins as though they were discussing a secret plan. After a minute, Lord Hoskins nodded that he approved of that spot and Lady Nightingale took another step. As she moved to walk around Isaac, she lightly placed a hand on his shoulder. It was only to better steady herself in the heavily packed snow. And yet, the touch called to him as a siren on the sea. He knew an intense desire to turn around and take her hand in his own. Possibly circle and inspect the snowman with her and Lord Hoskins.

Instead, he focused all his will on remaining perfectly still. Partially because if he moved he might dislodge the snowman's head —an ignominious death to an otherwise glorious day. Partially because he was afraid if he moved at all, he would do something foolish like reach for Lady Nightingale in return.

She finished walking around him, and her hand dropped away. The winter air rushed back against him and though he still wore several layers, not the least of which was his great coat, he felt the cold all the same.

Finally, Lady Nightingale and Lord Hoskins pronounced the snowman's head properly attached and said Isaac could let go.

"Very well," he said, hoping his large smile would serve as an effective guise for all that he was feeling inside. "Here we go."

Gently, he pulled his hands away, careful not to jar the head.

The snowman remained standing, upright and proud.

Lord Hoskins cheered, and Lady Nightingale joined him. Their laughter was catching and soon Isaac was clapping and cheering with them. Even the dog, who Isaac had learned was named Ponto, barked happily as he ran around the snowman.

The crunch of snow alerted Isaac that someone else was coming their way. He turned, as did the others, and found a tall, greying man coming their way, a basket in one hand and an old, worn top hat in the other. By the look of his clothes, he had to be the butler of Evergreen Cottage.

"One cannot have a proper snowman without a few additional items," he said with a smile that sent dozens of wrinkles spreading from the corners of his eyes across his entire face.

"Thank you, Mr. Clarke," Lady Nightingale said, taking the basket and hat.

"Once you and Master Joseph are finished," the man continued, "Cook has hot soup and some freshly baked bread waiting for you."

"That is quite considerate," Lady Nightingale said, bending down so that Lord Hoskins could see into the basket. "Tell her we'll be in just as soon as we finish up here."

"Very good, my lady." The man bowed, then turned and made his way back into the cottage.

Isaac was struck with how much kindness Lady Nightingale had shown her butler. Not only had she been polite in her words, but she'd spoken to him with warmth. In fact, he got the distinct impression that Lady Nightingale saw Mr. Clarke as a friend as much as a person she employed.

Lord Hoskins took out first a carrot and then a couple pieces of coal.

"Careful with the coal," Lady Nightingale said, her gaze going to her son's knitted mittens.

"Allow me," Isaac said, stepping forward. He knelt down beside her and across from her son and held out his hand. "It is far easier to wipe away soot from leather gloves than it is from mittens," he explained.

Isaac was quickly given charge of the coal, which he used to create eyes and buttons down the front. As he did so, Lord Hoskins and Ponto were sent toward the nearby tree line in search of arms.

"Just stay where I can see you," Lady Nightingale called after the two small, retreating forms.

"You sound like my sisters," Isaac said.

"Oh?" Lady Nightingale asked, wrapping a scarf around the neck of the snowman. "And are they married with children?" The scarf slipped, and she moved to set it back in place.

"Yes. My oldest sister, Frances, married a Mr. Reeves, and they have two children. Eleanor is my other sister. She married a Mr. Fernside, and they have three children. Her youngest is six, actually."

"Just older than Joseph, then." Lady Nightingale continued to struggle with the scarf which seemed more bent on becoming a belt around the snowman's middle than to stay up around his neck.

Isaac reached for a side of the scarf. "I'll hold this part in place while you secure the other side."

Lady Nightingale nodded. "I think we may have packed in too much snow around his neck while securing his head. There's no good place for the scarf to rest."

"Perhaps if we wrapped it securely all the way around?" Isaac took the scarf and did as he suggested.

Lady Nightingale took one look at his work and, placing a hand against her mouth, giggled a bit.

"What?" Isaac asked, standing back. At least the scarf was staying put now.

"It looks like a noose."

"But a very fashionable noose."

"The poor snowman looks like he's about to be hanged."

He rather did. Isaac tugged a bit on the scarf, loosening it around the front of the snowman's neck.

“Careful, or you’ll take his head right off.” Lady Nightingale hurried up beside him, her shoulder pressing against his as she tried to shove him out of the way and do it herself.

Isaac pushed back gently. “I won’t remove his head.” The scarf began to slip off one shoulder and Isaac instantly moved to tighten the scarf in that area.

Lady Nightingale’s shoulder shoved against his chest. “I won’t let you decapitate him,” she said with a laugh.

Isaac righted the scarf; it appeared to be staying now, and not too tightly either. Lady Nightingale lifted a hand, but there wasn’t a chance Isaac was going to let her ruin what he’d just gotten perfectly right.

He took hold of her wrist, laughing in response to her own giggles. “No, leave it. It’s just right.”

“No it’s not. You’ve fashioned a noose again, is all.”

Isaac wrapped his arms around her waist. “Leave”—he lifted her fully off the ground—“the scarf”—moved her back several steps —“alone.”

The minute her feet touched the snow-covered ground once more, she pulled away from him. But Isaac wasn’t ready to let her go just yet, not when he was certain she’d ruin all the work he’d put into getting the snowman’s scarf just right.

The result was that Lady Nightingale managed to turn around and face him, but not break free of his arms. She looked up at him, her hands pressed against his chest.

The world froze around them.

The merriment stilled as something new took its place. Something heady and electric. Something that sparked and heated the air between them. Something that urged Isaac to pull her in closer still.

A snowflake landed on Lady Nightingale’s cheek. It melted against her milky white skin, disappearing as he continued to hold her. Her eyes searched his as though trying to sort out what was happening every bit as much as he was.

As uncertain as Isaac was, he couldn’t seem to force himself to let go.

He didn’t want to let go.

Lady Nightingale fit against him as perfectly as a glove. Like a puzzle piece slipping into place. And yet, there was still so much about her life, about who she was, that he didn’t know.

But he wanted to know.

He wanted it like he’d never wanted anything before.

“Mama, Mama!” Lord Hoskins came running toward them, a long stick in either hand trailing behind him. Ponto, too, bounded behind the boy, a much smaller stick in his mouth.

Isaac and Lady Nightingale broke away at once. She turned toward her son and Isaac took the moment to gather himself.

What had he been thinking? This was Lady Nightingale—this was Mr. Grant's *daughter*. He couldn't allow himself to develop a *tendresse* for her. Such would be utterly foolish—completely insane.

He'd gotten caught up in the moment. But he wouldn't allow it to happen again.

Isaac had been taken in once by someone of the Grant family; he wasn't going to fall a second time.

When Isaac turned back around, the arms had been added to the snowman—whose scarf did *not* look like a noose, no matter what Lady Nightingale said—and she was lifting Lord Hoskins up so that the boy might add the final touch: the worn top hat.

"Isn't he fine, Mama?" Lord Hoskins asked.

"Oh yes, quite handsome." Her eyes jumped over to Isaac and back again. "Now," she said, addressing them both, "how about some hot soup and bread?"

"I'm so hungry," the boy said adamantly as he scrambled down out of his mother's arms. "Come on, Ponto. Time to eat." The two hurried through the snow and back toward the door.

Lady Nightingale moved toward Isaac once more. Her cheeks were pinker than before and her smile more unsure. "Will you come in and join us?"

He shouldn't. It would only cause problems. It was certainly a bad idea.

"Thank you, I'd like that." He offered her his arm and mentally kicked himself when she took it.

It seemed his curiosity was proving as dangerous as she was enticing.

Chapter 10



ALICE RODE atop her horse in trousers and a man's great coat. The attire was warmer than her usual skirt and pelisse, though such was a rather small consolation, since, so long as she was Mr. Allen, there was no chance Lord Brooks would hold her as he had yesterday. Neither did it make up for the annoyance of wearing glasses in the cold. Why hadn't anyone warned her that they often fogged up to the point that she couldn't see what was directly in front of her?

It was a blessing that her horse had a good head about him, otherwise she might have ended up lost among the trees.

"I appreciate you making time to join us today," Lord Brooks said from his horse beside her.

"It's nice to get out of doors on such a fine day," she said, careful of her voice. This morning, instead of simply riding over, Lord Brooks had written first to see if "Mr. Allen" might join him. She wasn't sure what to think about the note. Her first thought was to be thrilled that she was being given the chance to see him again, even if it was as Mr. Allen and not as Lady Nightingale. But that was closely followed by the realization that, if Lord Brooks was writing instead of simply riding over as he had the day before, it was probably because he was trying to *avoid* seeing Lady Nightingale altogether.

She was grateful, all the same, that she'd painted her face yesterday before going out in the snow with Joseph. Lord Brooks didn't seem to have any suspicions regarding Lady Nightingale or Mr. Allen. It was a small victory, but one that brought her relief all the same.

Just past Lord Brooks rode Lord Robins. "You should have seen Aunt Margarette's reaction when Brooks returned to Cresthearth yesterday and admitted he'd never made it to call on Miss Dowding."

"Was she much displeased?" Alice asked.

"Was she?" Lord Robins laughed. "Few things put that woman out, but Brooks ignoring her express wish that he pay a visit to Miss Dowding . . . well, it was a sight, that's for sure."

Lord Brooks only cast his gaze heavenward. "I explained the matter."

"What?" Lord Robins continued with a snort. "That you went to

Evergreen Cottage first, of all places? And then, after waiting a time to see if Mr. Allen could join you and learning that he couldn't, that your horse was too cold to continue? What kind of a story is that? Even I could have thought up a better excuse to not call on a lady."

Was that all Lord Brooks had told his friends and aunt? He'd stopped by and had to wait in the cold? Alice suddenly felt far less joy in riding next to him. He'd not only completely failed to mention that they'd spent what she considered a most enjoyable afternoon together, but Lord Brooks had made it sound as though he'd been met with rudeness at her cottage and had been forced to stay out of doors, in the cold, while Mr. Allen considered if he would go riding or not.

"I am sorry I was unavailable yesterday." Alice wasn't sure what else to say but felt she had to say *something*.

"It wasn't your fault," Lord Brooks said with a wave of his hand. "I understand business sometimes creeps up, and there's nothing for it but to set aside everything else and resolve the issues."

"If I were as poor as the two of you," Lord Robins said with a teasing smile, "I *might* be inclined to agree."

Rumors had started about a week ago, little whispers that Alice only heard bits of, saying that Mr. Allen had come to stay with Lady Nightingale because he was nearly broke and was relying on her hospitality to get by. Alice hadn't done anything to stop them, and they had quickly grown. It seemed an accepted fact now in Carlaby; since it helped to explain Mr. Allen's presence, Alice didn't mind overly much.

Still, that didn't mean she appreciated Lord Robins acting so high and mighty. "There's no shame in working hard, no matter if one's a butler or gentleman."

"Precisely," Lord Brooks said. "I've been trying to get Robins to understand that since our days at university."

They reached a turn and angled their horses down the new road. The large estate owned by Mr. Dowding came into view.

"I, for one," Lord Brooks continued, "have learned much from men of every walk. I've learned husbandry from my farmers, I've learned applicable law from my solicitor—"

"You've learned obstinacies from the town drunk," Lord Robins added with a smirk.

Lord Brooks brushed him off. "I've learned about breeding horses from my groomsman, and I've learned mathematics from my vicar."

Alice's head turned toward him. "From your vicar?"

"Indeed. He went into the church as a means of supporting himself and his aging mother, but he actually has quite the mind for numbers."

Alice found herself smiling. She liked to imagine Lord Brooks

speaking with his farmers and the vicar and all sorts of men. Her own father and husband had never so much as glanced the way of any man who wasn't equal to or above their own station. It was refreshing to spend time with someone who realized the folly of such a life and who cherished others' expertise and experience no matter who they may be. It was exactly the virtue she was hoping to instill in Joseph.

"Rubbish," said Lord Robins. "I still say that estate problems are for our men of business to handle."

There was a short pause, during which Lord Brooks's light-hearted expression seemed to harden. When he did speak, his voice was lower, almost empty. "You'll end up being hoodwinked with an attitude like that. I certainly was."

Alice could hear the anger that still lingered inside him whenever Lord Brooks brought up her father. She shifted about in her saddle, though it wasn't it or her horse that was causing her distress.

"Come off it," Lord Robins said. "Besides, you're on your way, right now, to pitch woo to a lady who could solve all your problems."

Alice's heart dropped.

"I'm not about to pitch woo, you idiot," Lord Brooks said. "I am merely getting to know her better."

"Are you, now? Because as I see it, you're only calling on Miss Dowding because you need her money."

Lord Brooks didn't meet his friend's gaze. "Don't be vulgar."

Alice watched, her heart suddenly feeling very heavy.

"Tell me honestly," Lord Robins continued. "If you were rich, would you be bothering to call on Miss Dowding this morning? Would you be pursuing a connection with her at all?"

Lord Brooks didn't respond.

Then it must be true. Lord Brooks, like so many other men, was only interested in a woman because of her dowry.

"I don't know why you're dragging your feet," Lord Robins continued in the silence. "Her father likes you, and she comes with the dowry you need. What else is there to get to know?"

"Allen," Lord Brooks said, turning toward her. "Talk some sense into him, please."

"If he isn't listening to you, I doubt he'd listen to me." Alice's tone came out stiffer than she'd intended. Was this not the very reason she was Mr. Allen? Too many men acted attentive and even affectionate when with a woman in possession of a large dowry, but they thought and spoke as Lord Robins when in private. It very much seemed as though Lord Brooks was one of them.

They pulled up to the house, and Lord Brooks made to dismount. As he did so, he leaned in toward his friend, lowering his voice a bit. "Just promise me you'll behave yourself while the ladies are present,"

Lord Brooks said with a sigh.

"When have you ever seen me be anything other than charming and delightful when around ladies?" Lord Robins also dismounted.

Alice hadn't brought her father's walking stick today, as it was hard to keep hold of while riding horseback, but at Lord Robins's words, she pictured the walking stick in her mind's eye and held it tighter, just as she would if it were in her possession.

With resolve to stay objective and calm, Alice also dismounted.

The butler answered the door promptly—he'd probably seen them riding up—and showed them into the parlor just off to the left. Once inside, Alice pulled off her glasses and quickly cleaned them while the butler's back was turned. Strange how dirty they seemed after only riding out of doors for a morning.

"Lord Brooks," the butler announced them, "Lord Robins, and Mr. Allen." Then with a bow, he left the room.

"Gentlemen," Mrs. Dowding said, beckoning them over to where she and her two daughters sat nearer the hearth. With tea already served and more than three used plates about, Alice could only guess someone else had been calling here and had left just before the three of them showed up. A gentleman? Or simply another young woman and friend from town?

They all began forward, but Lord Robins took hold of Alice's elbow, holding her back a bit. When Lord Brooks was a couple steps ahead of them, he whispered to Alice.

"You distract the mother, and I'll keep Miss Cecelia occupied. That way Brooks can have Miss Dowding all to himself."

The words sent a strange, uncomfortable lump down her throat. Alice's gaze moved to where Miss Dowding was curtsying before Lord Brooks. Her smile was soft, as always, but there was a brightness to it Alice hadn't seen before. It appeared as though Lord Robins had forgotten to mention on their ride over here that Mr. Dowding wasn't the only one who liked Lord Brooks.

And why shouldn't Miss Dowding like him? Lord Brooks was intelligent, funny, easy to converse with. He built great snowmen, and despite her antics yesterday, he truly was quite skilled at securing scarfs on slippery snow. Odd how it suddenly hurt to recall the memory.

Alice dutifully made her way over and took the open seat closest to Mrs. Dowding and very nearly sat down but then hesitated. She'd met these ladies as Lady Nightingale. But as far as the Dowdings were concerned, they'd never been introduced.

Lord Robins was already engaging Miss Cecelia Dowding in a conversation regarding the weather and lovely snow. Lord Brooks was seated beside Miss Dowding on the settee, who was saying something

so low, Alice couldn't hear. After being left to stand awkwardly for a minute, Alice finally cleared her throat—and prayed it sounded masculine enough. She'd not once practiced clearing her throat as a man before Mr. and Mrs. Clarke.

As no one jumped up and declared her a woman, she felt she must have done well enough.

Lord Brooks immediately stood, evidently catching his own lapse in decorum. "Please excuse me," he said to the ladies; he quickly made all the introductions. Once they were over with, Lord Brooks sat once more and just as quickly returned to his conversation with Miss Dowding.

That fist-sized lump returned to Alice's throat. She dropped her gaze and forced herself to take the seat beside Mrs. Dowding. Echoes of evenings in silence and solitude while her husband spent his time with others coursed through Alice. They crawled over her skin and weighed down her heart.

"Are you enjoying your time in Carlaby, Mr. Allen?" Mrs. Dowding asked.

Alice forced her gaze away from Lord Brooks. She was being ridiculous. She enjoyed Lord Brooks's friendship very much, but friends was all they could ever be. Especially so long as she was wearing breeches and had her hair cut short.

She looked over at Mrs. Dowding. "Very much so, thank you." She waved her hand, indicating the room in general. "You have a most lovely house."

"Thank you, sir," Mrs. Dowding said, pride evident in her voice. "This is the home my husband grew up in, and when we got married there was much that needed updating, I can assure you. But I do feel I have managed to keep the feel of the house's roots while still giving it a more modern comfort."

Now that Alice looked closer, she could see the matron was right. There were old pictures hanging on the walls, which spoke of family members now grown or gone. Beside them, there were fresh curtains and new glass panes in the windows. The shape and legs of the furniture showed it to be from a bygone era, but the upholstery was done up in a currently fashionable pattern and fabric.

Alice was impressed. "That requires quite a fine eye and no small amount of skill to mix the old with the new."

"I flatter myself that it does." Mrs. Dowding delved into a lengthy discussion regarding all she'd done in this room alone. How she'd tackled each piece with an eye to preserving the old, when possible, and celebrating the new when not.

As she spoke, Alice's gaze continually wandered toward Lord Brooks and Miss Dowding. Occasionally he laughed, but it wasn't the

joyful, full laughter she'd heard yesterday. This was a polite laugh, one perfectly suited to parlors and respectable company.

Still, it was a laugh. He wouldn't have laughed if he wasn't enjoying his time with Miss Dowding. They did look good together. Lord Brooks, with his jacket so beautifully filled out and his brown hair framing his lovely eyes and smile. Miss Dowding, all the more petite beside him, looking at him through her lashes.

Alice readjusted her legs, crossing them as Lord Robins had. She'd never had a London Season. Alice had gone almost overnight from wearing her hair in braids to wearing a wedding dress. There had been a few gentlemen about town who'd caught her eye, but she had known better than to dream or hope. Her role in her father's household had always been to marry the richest man of the highest title her father could find. And so she had, just as soon as she'd been of age.

Which meant she'd had no true experience flirting or attracting a man. She'd never danced with a gentleman one night then waited for him to call the next day; she'd never been overjoyed to see that same gentleman at a card party the following afternoon.

Watching Miss Dowding smile demurely and flutter her lashes, Alice felt suddenly naive and inexperienced, no matter that she was a widow with a son. Was it any wonder that, after Lord Brooks had pulled her away from their snowman and then Joseph had come running back, that he'd let go of her and acted the rest of the afternoon as though nothing at all had happened between them? He hadn't even admitted to his aunt and friends that he'd spent time with Lady Nightingale.

"Why don't I show you," Mrs. Dowding said, breaking into Alice's thoughts. "It is only in the next room over. If you like the hearth in here, you'll love what I've done with that one."

"Sounds like an excellent idea." Alice stood quickly, then offered her hand to help the matron rise.

"It has become quite a feature of the room, I can assure you."

"I am confident I will love it as much as you suggest." If nothing else, Alice certainly loved the idea of getting out of this room and not having to watch Miss Dowding and Lord Brooks together any longer. Whatever her own heart was about, it was proving itself quite a fool. Lifting her chin, Alice motioned for Mrs. Dowding to go before her. "Please, lead the way."

Chapter 11



CHRISTMAS DAY DAWNED, and Alice and Joseph quickly dressed for services. The ride to the church house was short, and though it was cold outside, the roads were clear after their last snow fall and the carriage was warm thanks to a lovely heated brick. Alice had never felt particular gratitude for not needing to wear glasses every day, but now that she'd worn them out in the cold several times, she was always thankful when she was venturing out as Lady Nightingale and could leave her spectacles at home.

Alice kept hold of Joseph's hand as they made their way to their family pew. Though Joseph smiled enough during the carriage ride there and even as they wound their way between the many parishioners, as the vicar spoke on about the first Christmas morning, Joseph's demeanor shifted.

He grew still, which was a most unusual thing for him, and then his brow creased. Alice kept glancing at him out of the corner of her eye while trying not to draw too much attention to the fact. Joseph's mouth formed a firm line, and he drew his feet up and onto the bench. With his knees sticking up, he rested his elbows against them and then placed his chin on his folded arms. Normally, Alice would have reminded him not to put his shoes up on the bench, but he seemed so intent on something, focused but also upset.

There was only one thing that made Joseph anything less than joyful and energetic—and that was heartbreak over not having a father.

The sermon ended, and those around them stood and began leaving. The doors opened and cold swept through the room, settling about Alice's feet. She sat silently for several minutes, the din of many voices calling out "Merry Christmas" filling the entire chapel.

After a minute, Alice leaned toward her little boy. "Joseph, the sermon is over. We ought to return home."

He didn't move, didn't even look over at her.

Alice placed a hand on his shoulder. "Are you all right, my dear?"

At length, he looked up at her. "Christmas holidays are almost over," he said, his voice laced with worry.

She didn't have to ask why he was so concerned that the season

would end soon.

Joseph scooted closer to her on the pew. “Do you really think Father Christmas will bring me a new papa this year?”

Oh, how she wished she could say yes, for his sake. Instead, all she could honestly tell him was, “I don’t know.”

His shoulders sagged, and he leaned heavily against her. “I know it’s asking a lot. But you said if anyone could get me a new papa, Father Christmas could.”

Well, she didn’t remember saying it exactly like that. But she also didn’t doubt that her ill-spoken words had *sounded* like that to Joseph.

Alice draped an arm around Joseph, pulling him closer and rubbing his arm. There was yet one more gentleman of her acquaintance who might prove a fine fit for herself and Joseph. Lord Oakley was rumored to be coming to Carlaby for Christmas but had thus far been detained. She’d had it on good authority that he had arrived at last and would be at the Christmas Day ball tonight. Alice could only hope he didn’t prove as disappointing as the other two prospects had.

Lord Brooks’s face floated to the surface of her thoughts. She could not deny that she far preferred his company to any other. She loved his openness, how he laughed and joked so easily no matter his current situation, and that he saw good in others regardless of their station.

She blinked a few times and looked once more at her son. For Joseph’s sake, however, she needed to stop spending so much time with the man. She wasn’t so big a fool to think *he* could ever fill her son’s need for a father. Lord Brooks needed to marry for money, and while Alice had that in droves, she could never be with a man who came into the marriage broke. Not that she faulted Lord Brooks for his current financial situation—that was her own father’s fault, no doubt.

But how could she even begin to trust a man who so desperately needed her money? She would forever wonder if he hadn’t *forced* himself to love her for her wealth. Every kind word from him, ever generous act, she would be left questioning the reasons behind it. Was it truly for her? Or was it truly because he needed her wealth? She could hardly tolerate such an uncertain life.

No, the only way she would know for certain a man loved her was if money was taken out of the equation altogether. If she married a gentleman who didn’t need her wealth at all, then she could more easily trust his motives.

On top of that, Lord Brooks still detested her father and didn’t particularly like her because of it.

No, nothing could ever happen between them.

“Shall we return home? I do believe Cook has some sweetmeats

and plum pudding she's been saving for today."

Joseph didn't move or say anything, but he did sigh loudly. Poor boy. How her heart ached that he was growing up without a father.

"Good morning to you, Lady Nightingale, Lord Hoskins."

Alice looked up and found the vicar standing just beside their pew. He was quite a young man for having already taken orders. With a fair complexion and not even a hint of facial hair, he almost looked like a boy in his father's robes. Was this what other men saw when they looked at Mr. Allen? Someone whom they knew they needed to treat as a grown man, no matter how much they wondered how old he truly was?

Alice pushed the thought away before any of it showed on her face. "Good morning to you as well, Mr. Morton, and Merry Christmas."

"Thank you, my lady." Mr. Morton turned toward Joseph. "And how are you doing this fine Christmas morning, my lord?"

Joseph shrugged.

"Did you like the sermon?" Mr. Morton pressed.

Joseph lifted his head. "I like that baby Jesus had a father. And his name was Joseph, same name as me."

"I did not know your Christian name was Joseph," Mr. Morton said, going down onto one knee so that he was eye level with her little boy.

Alice sat back and let the two of them speak.

"Mama said she named me Joseph because it was a fine, strong name. But it wasn't my father's name—he's dead. I wish I had a father, like Jesus did."

Tears pricked against Alice's eyes. She truly was trying to give her son everything he could possibly need. Nonetheless, she could never be a father for him. And sometimes, she gathered, a boy just needed a papa.

"You have a Father in heaven," Mr. Morton said, pointing up.

"But I want a father *here*. I asked Father Christmas to bring me one, but he hasn't yet."

"Perhaps Father Christmas simply needs more time. Some blessings take a while to arrive, you know."

Alice certainly knew—if she could manage to take another year or two to find the right man while also not breaking Joseph's little heart, she would do it in an instant.

"Well," Mr. Morton said at length, "Father Christmas is a fine man, but if you're going to ask anyone, have you tried asking the Father of us all?"

Joseph's brow creased. "I didn't think of that."

Mr. Morton's smile was gentle and sincere. "There's no better place

to pray and ask something of God than in a church house. Would you like to sit here and pray for a bit?"

Joseph thought for a moment, then nodded.

"I shall leave you to it then," Mr. Morton said, standing. "I'll just see to some of the others. If you'll excuse me, my lady." He bowed to them both, but then paused before walking away and once more turned to Joseph. "You're always welcome here, Lord Hoskins, no matter the time of day or your reasons for praying."

Alice mouthed a silent "thank you" to the vicar just before he moved off to speak with other parishioners.

Joseph clasped his hands together and shut his eyes. Alice had never seen her little boy pray so intently. She sat quietly, giving him all the space and time he wished for. While he was praying, Alice sent her own prayer up to heaven.

She prayed that she might find a man worthy of her son's admiration. A man who would treat them both well, who would love them and cherish them.

And, Alice prayed, if that was not to be, that she might find a way to be both mother and father to this little man of hers who was her entire world.

Chapter 12



"WHAT IN HEAVEN'S name is keeping Parsons?" Robins said, slumping lower in his chair.

Isaac would have liked to know the same thing. He, Robins, and Aunt Margarette had been ready and waiting in the parlor for over a quarter of an hour now.

"I'm sure he wants to look just right when he sees Miss Turner tonight," Aunt Margarette said with a spark in her eyes. "This is the much-anticipated Christmas Day ball, after all."

"She's already in love with him," Robins continued to moan. "Why bother with looking his best now?"

"Oh hush," Aunt Margarette said.

Isaac chuckled. "I'm inclined to agree with my friend on this one," he admitted to his aunt. "Miss Turner is all Parsons's in heart; what does it matter how his cravat is tied? Or if is shoes are particularly shined?"

Aunt Margarette cast her gaze heavenward as though she could barely tolerate their stupidity. "I do wish they taught more practical knowledge at university these days. I am sure philosophy is all well and good, but it certainly won't impact your lives nearly as much as knowing how to draw and hold a lady's attention."

Isaac shot a chagrined grimace Robins's way. "I think she has us there."

"Speak for yourself, Brooks. I happen to be quite good a drawing and holding a lady's attention."

"Like you drew and held Lady Nightingale's attention?" It was Aunt Margarette's turn to smirk.

"Well said, Aunt." Isaac laughed.

"I don't see why the two of you are suddenly so jolly," Robins said. "I've held her attention as long as any man in Carlaby."

Aunt Margarette nodded. "That's true. Lady Nightingale has drawn much notice her way, but she hasn't seemed to find any one man more to her liking than another. I won't wonder if she removes from Evergreen Cottage as soon as the weather permits and seeks a new husband somewhere else."

At his aunt's words, a strange unease settled in Isaac's chest. It

wasn't as though he'd begun to think she preferred him. They'd shared a most enjoyable afternoon together almost a week ago, but . . . well, he couldn't seem to make up his mind regarding her.

Among society, she was polite, respectable. Everything a young widow ought to be.

However, he'd also seen another side to her. At home, she was kind and affectionate toward her son. She was happy and even a bit tenacious.

And yet, she was also Mr. Grant's daughter.

Mr. Allen, Isaac could excuse, for he was only Mr. Grant's distant cousin through marriage. They shared no blood. But Lady Nightingale was Mr. Grant's *daughter*, and one could not be raised by a man without picking up some of his characteristics and traits.

All in all, he could not make heads nor tails of her.

She was a puzzlement, and there was no denying it.

"I do hope you will, Isaac," Aunt Margarette said.

Isaac looked up from the rolling fire—which he hadn't realized he'd taken to staring at—and found Aunt Margarette looking expectantly at him, and Robins struggling to hold in a laugh.

"I'm sorry," Isaac said. "You hope I'll do what?"

Robins's laughter broke free. "Did you not hear her?"

Isaac could only shake his head.

Robins threw both his hands in the air. "Best joke of the entire trip, and you missed it."

"Oh, I'm not joking," Aunt Margarette said.

"I said," Robins explained to Isaac, "that tonight might prove a perfect time for you to give Miss Dowding a little kiss under the mistletoe. You know, further your claim and see if she welcomes it." Robins grew more excited as he went on. "And your aunt said she hoped you would."

"Aunt Margarette," Isaac said, duly shocked. "Don't tell me your views of drawing and holding a lady's attention include scandal."

"There's nothing scandalous about a little mistletoe kiss," Aunt Margarette said with a sniff. "And I think for once, Robins is right. It is the perfect opportunity to better judge if Miss Dowding would welcome a proposal."

"I don't know," Isaac said. Now that he thought about it, he found himself not particularly keen on the idea of kissing Miss Dowding. Shouldn't a man feel at least a small thrill at such a prospect? It was probably only that he was sitting in front of his aunt and that was dampening the mood. No doubt, once he got to the ball and had Miss Dowding beneath the mistletoe, his feelings would change.

At the sound of footfalls, they all turned to see Parsons striding into the parlor.

He greeted them with a wide grin. “Well, *I’m* certainly going to be looking for all and any mistletoe tonight, that I can promise you.”

“Finally,” Robins said, standing quickly. “Now we can be off.”

Isaac also stood, then helped Aunt Margarette to her feet.

“The carriage is already out front,” she said, relying heavily on Isaac’s arm. “We’d best not keep the horses waiting any longer.”

“I think you mean,” Robins said, “we’d best not keep the *mistletoe* waiting any longer.”

“Well, I’m happy to think you may have learned something from me,” Aunt Margarette said as they moved out of the room. “But I still have half a mind to write that university of yours and let them know just how lacking your education has proved to be.”



The ballroom was magnificent. Every wall was decked with holly and evergreen boughs. Wreathes adored every door and window. More candles lit the space than Isaac had ever seen in a single room, and a massive yuletide log crackled in the large fireplace along one wall. The scent was heavenly, a bit evergreen, a bit spice from the hot cups of cider.

No sooner had they arrived than Parsons spotted Miss Turner, and Robins pointed out a young lady he wished to know better. Which left only Aunt Margarette walking beside Isaac, her arm looped through his so that he might help support her. It seemed, as the winter grew colder, her ability to get around diminished. Though Robins and Parsons had originally come to Carlaby with the plans of leaving only a couple of weeks later, Isaac was glad they’d stayed on longer. Though Aunt Margarette wouldn’t admit as much aloud, it wasn’t good for her to be alone just now. He hoped once the spring came and the weather turned pleasant, she would be more comfortable and independent again, but for now he was very grateful to be by her side.

“Such a lovely ball,” she said with a sigh. “I remember the first Christmas my dear husband and I spent together after we were married. We hosted a Christmas Day ball nearly as glorious as this.”

Isaac patted her hand where it rested on his arm. “He was a good man.” Slowly, they made their way around the outskirts of the room.

“He was,” Aunt Margarette said. “And I was made all the more good for loving him.”

Isaac nodded as they walked. He didn’t blame her for growing nostalgic. There always seemed something in the air this time of year that made even the most cynical of hearts a bit softer. And his aunt was far from cynical to begin with.

“Love can do that, you know,” she said. “Make you a better

person."

Ah, so this wasn't about nostalgia. This was more of his aunt's plan to shackle him to Miss Dowding.

"Love is a beautiful thing," he agreed, "when one can afford it."

She came to an abrupt halt and forced him to turn and face her fully. "You can't *not* afford it."

"With all respect, dear aunt, my pocketbook disagrees."

"Without love, you are poorer than the homeless on the streets." She gave him a little huff. "And I don't care if your *pocketbook* agrees or not." Though she tried to hide it, she grimaced a little as they continued walking. It seemed her joints were giving her more trouble than Isaac had previously realized.

"Perhaps we should find you a comfortable seat," he suggested, grateful for any reason to change topics.

"Oh, very well. But make it somewhere I can watch the dances."

"And the mistletoe?" he asked, looking about for just the right vantage point.

"And the mistletoe," she agreed.

They soon found a seat that fit all requirements. The chair looked quite comfortable and faced the dance floor, but one only had to turn one's head to the right to see down a side corridor where a bit of mistletoe hung across the hallway.

Aunt Margarette settled into the seat with a heavy sigh. "Growing old is not for the faint of heart, my boy."

He nearly laughed but held it in. Aunt Margarette must have caught sight of someone for she waved them over before settling deeper into the chair.

"Now go find Miss Dowding and show her that mistletoe." Aunt Margarette pointed down the corridor. "Mrs. Turner is walking this way. She will keep me company."

"Suppose Miss Dowding doesn't care for a kiss from me?"

"Then promise me you'll kiss *someone* before the night is out. It might be more eye-opening than you realize."

"Suppose, after a few dances, I come back for you and the two of us take a stroll down the corridor?"

"Do you wish for a slap?" she said, not at all sounding as though she were in jest.

"Would you not give me a kiss then, Aunt?"

"After you soiled my evening with talk of marrying for money? Certainly not."

This time, Isaac did laugh out loud. As he did so, he caught sight of Lady Nightingale watching him. A tingling awareness spread over Isaac. The moment their eyes met, she looked away.

Gads, but she was breathtaking tonight. She always was, so he

wasn't surprised. Still, seeing her here brought back the memories of laughing with her in the snow, of trying to secure a scarf, of her in his arms.

Was it wrong that those few moments had replayed over and over in his mind almost constantly since then? Or that he found himself wishing he could relive them?

"Mrs. Turner," Aunt Margarette said as the woman drew near. "How good to see you again."

"My dear friend," Mrs. Turner said. "The pleasure is all mine. Might I join you?"

Isaac shook himself and turned to both elderly women, now sitting side by side. With his aunt taken care of, he truly ought to find someone to dance with.

"If you will excuse me, ladies," he said.

They inclined their heads his way and he took a step toward Lady Nightingale.

Aunt Margarette reached out and caught his arm before he departed.

"There she is," Aunt Margarette said, pointing the opposite direction he had been planning to walk. "Miss Dowding. She's standing next to her sister and mother."

Isaac glanced over his shoulder. It was as his aunt had said. Miss Dowding stood with Miss Cecilia Dowding and Mrs. Dowding. More still, as he looked, Miss Dowding caught sight of him and offered him a small smile.

"You'd best hurry over there," Mrs. Turner said, none too helpful. "If you don't ask her to dance now, she'll feel it's a slight."

Mrs. Turner was right. He couldn't turn his back on Miss Dowding now. Still, he glanced back to where Lady Nightingale had stood. She was no longer there. He quickly glanced about the room. He found her easily enough; finding Lady Nightingale was something he never struggled to do. She was making her way to the dancefloor with Lord Sempill.

His stomach flipped painfully.

Lord Sempill was titled, well-connected, and quite wealthy. In fact, he was exactly the sort of man he could see Lady Nightingale pairing well with.

He didn't think Lord Sempill would build a snowman or argue over how to wrap a scarf. But if all she wanted was a rich man who would help her keep her standing in society, Lady Nightingale could hardly find a better fit.

"Well?" Aunt Margarette said. "You mustn't keep the lady waiting."

"No, of course not." With that, he spun about, turning his back on

Lady Nightingale, and hurried to the other side of the room.

Chapter 13



ISAAC DANCED WITH MISS DOWDING, then Miss Turner. After, he danced with a couple other ladies. But they all quickly began to blur together. Though he greatly enjoyed a fine Christmas dance, as before, he never truly lost sight of Lady Nightingale. He was aware when she finished her dance with Lord Sempill. He knew when she'd taken the dancefloor with a man unfamiliar to him. He felt drawn to the table of mulled cider when she made her way there.

Of a truth, his feet carried him closer to her without his consent.

Isaac stood at one end of the long table, while Lady Nightingale picked up a glass from the other. She took a small sip then momentarily placed a hand against her forehead. Isaac wasn't looking at her straight on, more just watching her out of the corner of his eye. Which, now that he thought about it, was quite an ungentlemanly thing to do. Still, he couldn't deny that she looked . . . tired. Possibly even worried.

Neither of those emotions had he come to associate with Lady Nightingale. She always seemed bright, cheerful, vibrant.

She took another swallow but didn't move away from the table. Indeed, she appeared to be closing her eyes for a moment, her brow creased.

The music of the current dance came to an end. There was a smattering of claps, and the swell of voices grew. The next set would start soon. Isaac had promised Miss Dowding a second dance tonight, and now that he'd danced with a few other women, this set would suit well. Only, he couldn't seem to walk away. Something deep inside his gut wouldn't let him leave Lady Nightingale on her own, not when she appeared distressed.

Perhaps he should ask her to dance?

He felt both repulsed . . . and strangely thrilled at the notion. Isaac subtly shook his head at himself. He wasn't about to dance with the daughter of the man who had nearly ruined him. But he wasn't a cad either. He wouldn't turn his back if there was a chance he could help her in her time of need. Standing tall, he covered the small distance between them. He would ask after her welfare and that was all. Most likely, he was wrong, and she was completely fine and the

conversation between them would be over in enough time for him to find Miss Dowding before the next set.

"Lady Nightingale," he said, drawing near her.

She gave a little start, her eyes flying open and her glass nearly tipping.

"Lord Brooks." She quickly recovered, giving him a curtsy. She faced him fully as she stood. Was he seeing things that weren't there? Or were her eyes a bit red-rimmed? Her smile a tad less joyful?

"Pardon my frankness, my lady . . ." Now that he was standing before her, he felt far less certain about how to proceed. It wasn't exactly good manners to point out that a woman appeared tired or drawn. "Only, I wanted to ask after your health."

Now who sounded overly polite and far from sincere?

"I am quite well, thank you."

He wasn't surprised by her answer. But he was surprised that she turned away from him, seeming to end the conversation.

But her shoulders were a bit slumped, her jaw tighter than usual. Still, Isaac was interested in pursuing a relationship with *Miss Dowding*, or, if she wouldn't have him, any number of *other* ladies both here and in London. He shouldn't be growing so very familiar with Lady Nightingale. He shouldn't know her posture so well as to see the small differences between how she normally held herself and how she seemed to sag tonight. He shouldn't know that the spark which normally lighted her eyes was missing now.

He shouldn't.

But hang it all, he did.

And he couldn't find it in himself to leave her until he knew why, or at least tried to lift her spirits in some way.

"Do you care to dance?" he asked.

Her eyes grew wide momentarily, but she quickly looked away. "Thank you, but no. I've danced nearly all I care to for one night."

Yes, he'd seen her stand up nearly every set.

Lady Nightingale placed her cup back down and tugged her gloves more firmly into place, "I think I shall step out into the corridor for a moment. Good evening, Lord Brooks."

It was a dismissal if ever he'd heard one. Yet, as she turned and walked away, Isaac hurried and caught up.

"Shall I accompany you, then?"

Her surprise returned as her step slowed. "Oh . . . very well, then."

Side by side, they moved across the room and out a set of open doors. The corridor was not nearly so packed as the ballroom itself. Lady Nightingale seemed to sigh with relief as they moved yet farther away from the crush.

"You look tired, my lady," Isaac found himself saying. "Or, perhaps

worried?" He hoped she'd hear his sincere desire to help in his voice.

Her lips ticked up on one side in a half smile. "When you said I ought to pardon your frankness, you apparently weren't jesting."

He found himself smiling in return. "I do not like to see a lady in distress."

"Oh?" She lifted a single brow. "Now I'm a woman in distress? Next you'll be telling me I appear quite haggard."

Isaac's gaze traveled over her elegant dress, regal auburn hair, and milky white skin. No, Lady Nightingale was far from haggard. He doubted she could look haggard if she tried.

Lady Nightingale stopped and turned toward him. "I'm sorry, Lord Brooks. I do appreciate your concern, and I don't mean to sound ungrateful."

"Then why not tell me what's troubling you?" Because he knew something was.

She pursed her lips and ran a hand over her skirt, seeming to contemplate if she should or not. At length, she spoke once more. "It's Joseph."

Her son? "Is he all right?" Surely the boy wasn't sick or injured. The thought of the bright-eyed Lord Hoskins hurt made his stomach twist into a tight knot.

"Nothing like that."

Her words eased the tension building inside him.

"It started this morning at services," she continued. "He . . . said a few things that upset me. Ever since, he's been going on about when can he learn to shoot, or how does one shave, or will he attend Cambridge or Oxford one day."

They did seem like rather random questions from the boy. Lady Nightingale shook her head, her hand going to her forehead as it had when she stood by the refreshment table.

Then the pieces fell into place; they were all questions a boy would ordinarily ask his *father*, not his mother. Shooting. Shaving. Even attending university. Something shifted about in Isaac's chest, as though Lord Hoskins's questions were knocking at his heart. He suddenly knew a desire to reach for Lady Nightingale, to place a hand on her arm, or take her hand, or . . . even pull her into his arms and hold her like he had that afternoon in the snow.

But he didn't do any of those things.

Because that would be foolish in the extreme.

Instead, he clasped his hands behind his back to keep them from misbehaving.

"He is still young yet, for any of those things."

"But he won't be young forever."

Isaac bent at the waist, bringing their heads closer together. "I

have no doubt that you are more than capable of finding solutions to these and any other problems bacon-brained enough to stumble into your path."

She smiled, a bit of spark returning to her eyes. He could still see the worry and uncertainty in her posture, but she seemed lighter, more like her true vibrant self.

His heart lurched inside his chest at the sight.

Isaac suddenly became aware that he and Lady Nightingale were being watched.

"Do you think he means to actually *use* the mistletoe? Or only stand stupidly beneath it, blocking the way for those of us who are more intelligent?"

Parsons. Isaac stood up straight and shot his friend a glare. It was only after he scowled most intently that he realized Miss Turner was on Parsons's arm. Isaac schooled his expression. He gaze drifted back to Lady Nightingale who was looking up at the ceiling above them, a blush slowly creeping over her cheeks. Isaac didn't have to look up to know what she was gazing at.

Blast. He'd *known* there was mistletoe hanging in this corridor. But he'd been so wrapped up talking to Lady Nightingale, somehow the fact had slipped his mind. He would have thought perhaps *she* had contrived a way to get him beneath it—he didn't doubt she was clever enough to have done such a thing—except he knew she had no desire to kiss him. His title was below her own, and he'd hardly a shilling to his name.

It seemed they'd both been caught unawares.

"Well, get on with it."

And Parsons wasn't helping matters.

Isaac kept his voice low, not wanting to further embarrass Lady Nightingale. "If you wish to simply turn around and leave, I'll not blame you."

"You can't do that," Miss Turner insisted; apparently, Isaac had not spoken as softly as he'd hoped. "It would mean bad luck. If a couple is caught beneath the mistletoe, they *must* kiss." Miss Turner sounded almost panicked. She must believe in such things far more than he did, then. For, though Isaac may be ridiculed if it got out that a woman had turned down a kiss from him on Christmas Day, he doubted he'd face any worse luck than that.

Lady Nightingale looked far less certain. Her fingers fidgeted and, for the first time since he'd met her, she wouldn't look him in the eye.

Did she dislike the idea of being forced to kiss him that much?

"It will undoubtedly be less talked about," Lady Nightingale said, "if you do just kiss me. A small, chaste kiss, that is."

Apparently she *did* dislike the idea that much.

With his hands still clasped behind his back, Isaac leaned in toward her once more. He could feel Parsons smirking and Miss Turner's careful eye. No doubt, there were any number of other individuals passing by at that moment who would take note of him bestowing a mistletoe kiss on Lady Nightingale. There were probably several gentlemen who wished they could trade places with him. He would have, gladly, had it been possible to do so. So long as he kept the kiss short, though, no one would get the wrong idea. He'd hate for rumors to spread.

Their lips met.

Hers were soft, inviting. The world around him dissolved away. This felt so right. Warmth spread through him. His hand came up and cupped her face. Even through his glove, he could feel the softness of her cheek. She leaned toward his touch, a subtle movement, but one he was fully aware of all the same. His heart responded in kind, accelerating until he felt it would leap fully out of his chest.

They broke apart, but she still hovered so near him. It would be so easy to lean back in, claim her lips once more. She wasn't quickly retreating as he'd expected her to, and he found no desire to pull farther away either.

She smelled of vanilla and spiced nuts. His thumb gently stroked her cheek.

Then the world came back, like waves crashing against him. The loud din of voices, the music from the ballroom, the heat of so many people in one corridor, the feel of eyes on him.

Isaac stood up straight, his hand dropping away from Lady Nightingale and back to his side.

She cleared her voice softly. "If you will excuse me." She tipped her head in farewell and then hurried away. Honestly, it almost appeared as though she were *running* away.

Parsons and Miss Turner were staring with wide eyes at him. The heated tingling from the kiss still echoed about his skin, but now it mingled with his surroundings and left an undeniable awkwardness in the air.

What had just happened?

That was not at all what he'd imagined kissing Lady Nightingale would be like.

Isaac shook his head at himself. He'd have to piece it out later. For now, he was standing, alone, beneath the mistletoe. Hardly knowing what he was saying, Isaac took his leave from Parsons and Miss Turner and moved toward the ballroom—the opposite direction Lady Nightingale had gone.

Devil take him, but he'd just kissed a woman in front of all Carlaby society far more affectionately than could be deemed proper. He

didn't even *like* Lady Nightingale.

And yet, his heart had responded to her in a way it had never done to another lady, ever. The way she'd leaned toward his touch, the way she'd leaned toward *him*. He clenched his hand tightly, the feel of her cheek against his palm still fresh in his mind. Was he mad to think she'd felt something, as he had?

Did he want her to feel something? She was still the daughter of Mr. Grant. He still didn't trust that gleam in her eye; her intelligence both impressed him and unsettled him. Gads, the more he thought on it the more emotions and uncertainties swirled together in an unending blend. He didn't know what to think.

Isaac moved through the ballroom doors and came to a stop.

Lady Nightingale wasn't in the room; she'd fled from him in the other direction. She was probably hiding in the lady's drawing room for the time being. As much as he'd warmed at her response to his kiss, he'd felt cold over how she'd hurried off so quickly. Why had he kissed her so completely? Had she not clearly said she only welcomed a small, chaste kiss? Neither of those were words he'd use to describe what they'd just shared. Why was he surprised that she'd run from him?

Yet, *during* the kiss, he knew she'd enjoyed herself. He could not be so mistaken as to think it had only been on his part . . . could he?

Maybe he was only fooling himself.

Blast, but he was confused over the entire matter.

Dancers spun about the center of the ballroom, pushing everyone else toward the edges. The room was hot and the noise far harsher on his ears than before. Several paces off to his left stood Miss Dowding beside her mother. Just as earlier in the night, when her gaze met his, she smiled, clearly wishing he would approach.

His first dance with Miss Dowding suddenly felt like it had been a lifetime ago.

Strange how much one kiss could alter things.

Still, he had promised Miss Dowding another dance. Isaac cast off thoughts of what had just happened and forced his mind to stay in the present.

He would dance with her a second time, as he'd promised, and then he'd go home. Hopefully Aunt Margarette was feeling the lateness of the hour and wouldn't object.

He strode purposefully through the room toward Miss Dowding. The sooner he could get through this second dance with her, the better.

Isaac was ready for Christmas Day to be over.

Dear Amelie

Cresthearth Manor, Carlaby
December 26th, 1815

My dear friend, what do you suppose has happened? My nephew has kissed Lady Nightingale. I would not have believed it if I had not seen it with my own eyes.

It was beneath the mistletoe—but it was no perfunctory kiss given out of obligation. I was not so close as I would have liked to witness the event properly. Nonetheless, I can tell you I saw enough to alter my view of the situation entirely. I watched Lord Brooks dance directly afterward with Miss Dowding, the woman I intended to match him with. He was stiff with her, polite, but clearly eager to be done. We left the ball as soon as the music ended and he came to collect me.

I cannot continue to think that his heart will ever be touched by Miss Dowding. Either Lady Nightingale will ruin all other women for him while he's here in Carlaby, or else she will take up residence in his affections herself.

I'm not sure which would be the better result.

I would hate to fail at my matchmaking plan this winter, however, I have never cared for Lady Nightingale. Though now that I think on the reasons why, I realize that my opinions of her are based solely on the actions of her father. I know my nephew had previously done the same, but if that kiss was any indicator, his opinions have since been altered. Perhaps it is time I allow mine to do the same.

Do you suppose I can still claim a victory if my nephew chooses to make a match with a woman I hadn't initially planned for him?

After all, my original intent was for him to find happiness in marriage, and not simply financial security. Lady Nightingale could certainly provide the later, but if she is also capable of providing the first, I wouldn't balk at the union. I only want his happiness.

I am so very sorry to hear about your recent poor health. Why must these bodies of ours turn frail just as our minds are the most experienced and wise? It leaves one most decidedly put out.

As for the marquess and your granddaughter, I do not know how to counsel you—so much for my years of experience and wisdom. I think you are right to question his suitability, no matter his title. To imagine anyone behaving in such a manner? I am appalled and

mortified on your behalf . . . and perhaps a bit intrigued and giddy at the thought of what will unfold next. You will write me all the details, will you not?

And while you're writing me, tell me that so long as Lord Brooks finds a wife he adores, I can still claim the Christmas holiday a success.

Yours, etc.

Margarette Fudge

Chapter 14



ALICE, dressed as Mr. Allen, strode into Greenbulls. Strange that she was so used to waltzing around a men's club in breeches, but here she was. After a manservant took her hat and greatcoat, Alice moved toward what had quickly become her favorite chair—one near the center of the far wall where she could see nearly the entire room easily.

Without preamble, she collapsed into it with a grunt.

Gracious but she hated today. Yesterday had been filled with visits and Christmas boxes for her staff. Many of the men she'd danced with the night before had sent her flowers or even called on her. The evening had seen only her and Joseph, enjoying dinner in the nursery.

But this morning had dawned and with it, a new sense of urgency. If she was to find an honorable husband—one who wouldn't commandeer all her wealth and shove her aside—before Twelfth Night, she had to get a move on. She'd spent too much time talking with Lord Brooks and watching men lose small fortunes while gambling. Today, she needed to stay focused. Surely there was at least *one* gentleman in Carlaby who would fit her requirements. Her only hope lay in Lord Oakley.

Alice leaned forward, placing elbows on knees, and scanned the entire room. It was quite the fullest she'd ever seen Greenbulls. It seemed the men of town were tired of holiday celebrations at their various homes and wanted a temporary escape.

Most of the men here, however, she'd already learned enough about to discount. But she wasn't going to go home today until she found a gentleman whose acquaintance she could further.

Lord Brooks wasn't here. Without truly looking for him, she'd sought him out all the same. Her mind flitted back to their kiss. Heat stole up her cheeks as it always did whenever she remembered that moment—and she'd remembered it a lot.

Alice still hadn't been able to truly make heads or tails of what had happened. She'd made it clear that she was quite all right with a small kiss. At least, she'd thought that much was clear. When they'd been caught underneath the mistletoe, Alice had first believed Lord Brooks would simply spin about on his heel and leave her there. Alice didn't

particularly care about what others said regarding her, but being jilted beneath the mistletoe wasn't exactly appealing either. She'd only hoped to assure him he could kiss her without fear of her getting the wrong notion or of being shackled to his enemy's daughter.

Would he do that? Would he, of all men, try to lure her in just so he might have her fortune? She wouldn't have thought that of Lord Brooks.

Or perhaps that moment when he'd held her as they built the snowman had elicited emotions in him as well as it had her. Perhaps that kiss which had heated her—had *filled* her—had also done the same to him. Could he have felt what she had?

No—certainly not. Alice pushed against her knees, sitting back in the chair. Lord Brooks hated her almost as much has he hated her father. More still, most of their time together had been while she was acting as Mr. Allen. Lord Brooks didn't know all those times they were agreeing on politics or discussing husbandry practices that it was *Alice* he had been talking to. Horse-back rides and time together at Greenbulls—those were all only meaningful to her.

So, no. Their shared kiss could not have been a moment of true connection for him. Either he'd been swept up in the moment, caught unawares by the Christmas spirit, or he was toying with the idea of marrying her for her wealth.

Alice covered her face with a hand. She felt sick.

No matter Lord Brooks's true intentions, she knew he needed an infusion of wealth. With that knowledge in mind, how could she ever trust that he actually wanted *her*?

Slowly, she blew out a slow breath. This was why she'd solemnly vowed not to marry a man who needed money; no matter how much a man flattered her or bestowed attentions upon her, she would never truly know if it was herself or her money that interested him. She would never be able to trust even the most considerate acts. It was like Lord Robins had said the other week as they'd ridden to call on Mrs. and Miss Dowding. Lord Brooks needed a wife who brought wealth into the marriage, not love. If he now was showing any signs of softening toward Lady Nightingale—a woman he greatly disliked—the only logical reason she could find was that he was a fortune hunter at heart.

Alice sat up straight once more; it was time she shoved Lord Brooks from her mind and focused on the men currently at Greenbulls. Preferably the ones who already had enough in their own coffers that blunt would not be the only thing they saw when they looked at her.

Standing not too far off was Lord Oakley. Thank the heavens for that. Alice stood and moved his direction. He was the last of the three gentlemen she'd hoped to further acquaintances with this winter. He'd

finally arrived just in time for the Christmas Day ball, and she'd even danced with him once. He'd been as considerate and polite as ever.

It was blessedly easy to meet a gentleman when everyone believed she was a gentleman as well. Introductions were far simpler this way. For just over a quarter of an hour, Alice stood beside Lord Oakley, and they watched a hazard game together. He was interested in games of chance, but never wagered more than a few pounds. He had enjoyed the ball the other night but spoke not a single crass or vulgar comment regarding any of the women he mentioned. Alice already knew his fortune to be secure and quite equal to her own.

Too bad the longer they spoke, the more her mind drifted to other things. As he spoke about his family—a mother, two brothers, and a very young sister by his mother's second marriage—Alice caught herself more than once wondering how Joseph was doing and if he was listening to his nursemaid. As Lord Oakley spoke about his business which had kept him from coming to Carlaby sooner, Alice thought about Lord Brooks and the kiss they'd shared . . . and how confused it left her still.

Then, as though thoughts of him could conjure Lord Brooks out of thin air, Alice glanced up from the game and caught him staring at her.

It was as though a fire lit suddenly inside her chest, a burning spreading through her faster than she thought possible.

He was here.

And he clearly wished to speak with her.

Already, he was halfway across the room, heading directly for her.

Of the many gentlemen visitors she'd received yesterday, Lord Brooks had not been among them. If he was truly wishing to press her into a marriage so that he might secure his own future, wouldn't he have come to visit her? She'd truly expected he would. And yet, he hadn't come. It was yet another piece of the puzzle she couldn't quite place.

Lord Brooks reached her. "Good day to you, Mr. Allen."

Hearing the name stilled a bit of the agitation inside Alice. Of course when he looked at her now he didn't see Lady Nightingale; he saw her cousin. Good heavens, she'd nearly forgotten. He didn't want to see *Alice* at all.

"Good day to you," she said, struggling against her own voice.

Clearly she hadn't hid much of her turmoil, for Lord Brooks's expression dropped, and his lips tugged to one side.

His lips—those beautiful, perfect lips that had kissed her less than forty-eight hours ago.

Alice forced her gaze back to the game. One of the men rolled a nine, and the whole table cheered as the man scooped up his earnings.

Lord Brooks took another half step toward her, and though Alice wasn't looking at him directly, she felt him move closer as one feels a windstorm gale.

"I actually was hoping to find you here today," Lord Brooks said to her. "Might we be able to talk for a moment?"

She probably should tell him no. Alice needed to distance herself from Lord Brooks, and that wasn't going to happen so long as she entertained a friendship with him as Mr. Allen.

Blast, but she hated Mr. Allen just now.

And now she was thinking obscenities like a man would. This wasn't so grand a plan as she'd originally believed. The sooner she found a suitable husband and put Mr. Allen behind her, the better.

Something that wouldn't happen so long as she allowed Lord Brooks to monopolize her time.

And yet, as she glanced over at him, she found she couldn't tell him no. She didn't want to stop being his friend; she didn't want to give up their time talking and thinking aloud together. Of all the various things she'd done this Christmas holiday, other than those cherished moments with Joseph, nothing had cheered her up or come close to being as important to her as those times with Lord Brooks.

"Very well," she said to him. She'd work on giving him up tomorrow.

Alice bid farewell to Lord Oakley and turned to follow Lord Brooks toward a set of chairs where they might speak more openly.

Lord Oakley, however, called after her. "Is your cousin at home any day this week? I should like to call on her."

That was a good thing, surely. Alice no doubt ought to feel a thrill of elation at the news. The first man she'd met so far that had a fortune himself and didn't care to lose it at cards, who wasn't a womanizer, and didn't seem bent on ruling over her wanted to call on her.

And yet, she felt no thrill, no excitement. "She will be at home day after tomorrow," Alice said.

"Tell her she may depend on me."

Alice inclined her head and then turned and followed Lord Brooks.

Lord Oakley would be calling on her day after tomorrow. That meant she had just over twenty-four hours to get Lord Brooks firmly and completely out of her head.



Isaac took a seat and then watched as Mr. Allen took the one beside him. He'd been going over what he might say in his mind all of yesterday and all this morning. The only conclusions he'd come to in

all that time were firstly, that he truly did need to speak to Mr. Allen about Lady Nightingale, a topic they both usually hedged around and preferred to ignore, and secondly, he had no idea how the man would respond.

Judging by the way Mr. Allen sat but didn't look at him, his posture stiff, Lady Nightingale had told him already about the kiss and how unwanted it had been on her part.

He'd be hanged, however, if Lady Nightingale was going to come between himself and Mr. Allen. The gentleman had become far too good a friend to lose.

"I wish to say something," Isaac began, speaking more to Mr. Allen's shoulder than his face, since the man still refused to look at him. "And I gather by your demeanor that you know the subject already."

"Is it regarding my cousin?"

"Yes, but more to the point, I am referring to . . . the Christmas Day ball."

"She told me of it."

What Isaac wouldn't give to have overheard that conversation. Had Lady Nightingale spoken of him like a cad who'd taken unwanted liberties? Or as a fool she'd enjoyed baiting? Either way, he would remember to steer clear of her in the future.

"I only wanted to be sure . . ." His words died off. Even after all the time he'd spent rehearsing this in his head, he still found his thoughts hard to express. "I'd hate for her to have gotten the wrong impression." Namely that he was a jackanapes. More than anything, Isaac realized, after stewing over this for hours yesterday, that he wouldn't be at peace so long as he wondered if she believed he was the same type of man as her father.

He didn't care to continue a connection with Lady Nightingale, but he hated the idea of knowing she was out there thinking he had only wished to use her.

"She knows you sincerely dislike her," Mr. Allen said, "and you would never consider a connection with her, if that's what you mean."

Well, that was rather putting a fine point on it. He had disliked her, strongly, at one point. And yet, he didn't feel that way now. No, it wasn't that he disliked her, more that he didn't trust her. He didn't trust that intelligence in her eyes or the way she always looked over a room as though understanding each person therein in an instant and calculating how best to play the room to her advantage.

Mr. Allen turned toward him, his brow set in a tight line. "Perhaps it is poor form of me to say as much—which is why I never said anything before—but I feel I must speak up now." A small pause. "Lady Nightingale is quite determined to not marry a fortune hunter."

“And she thinks I am one?” Isaac sputtered.

“Aren’t you? You all but admitted the other day that you are only pursuing Miss Dowding because of her large dowry.”

That was true, but he wouldn’t exactly consider himself a fortune hunter. He wasn’t a harsh man, bent only on furthering his own gains. He had no choice but to marry for money—but he fully intended to treat his wife with respect and generosity. “Have you been telling your cousin, then, of all of our outings and conversations?”

“I haven’t had to. She is able to discern for herself who is after her for her wealth and who isn’t.”

Bully for her. “You mean, she won’t entertain any gentleman who is as down on his luck as myself.”

Mr. Allen’s mouth tightened into a sharp line. “Can you blame her? She’s been very actively involved in her various estates for over a year now. They have flourished under her watchful eye.” Mr. Allen’s hands moved in agitation as he spoke, his voice growing in volume. “She has done very well and is hesitant to return to a life where she is shoved aside while her husband rules over everything to the point of forgetting she even exists.”

Isaac stared, stunned at Mr. Allen’s outburst. He hadn’t realized Mr. Allen knew Lady Nightingale so well. He’d always assumed the man had hardly known his cousin at all before necessity had dictated that he come and stay at Evergreen Cottage for a time.

The silence that settled between them only proved to highlight the emotion with which Mr. Allen had expressed himself.

Isaac’s gaze dropped to his hand, which was clutching the arm rest tightly. “Thank you for your honesty, Mr. Allen,” he said slowly. “If you would be so kind as to let your cousin know that she doesn’t need to worry about me, that I won’t be causing her any more distress, I would appreciate it.”

Mr. Allen nodded.

“And,” Isaac sat up straighter, his heart not allowing him to leave it at that, “please let her know I didn’t mean for things to get quite so out of hand. Tell her I apologize for the other day. I was foolishly caught up in the moment. The kiss meant nothing.” And yet, the moment he’d said the words, he doubted their sincerity. Surely a man could not *feel* the way he had during that kiss and not have it mean something.

“Of course,” Mr. Allen said, placing his hands against his knees and pushing to a stand. “But I have a feeling she already knows.”

Isaac looked up at Mr. Allen; the man seemed even more upset now than when they’d first begun the conversation. Isaac was clearly messing things up further, but he wasn’t sure where he’d gone wrong.

“*We* are still friends, though, correct?” Isaac asked. “Surely one

insignificant kiss between your cousin and me won't ruin that." Mr. Allen's friendship was the best part of this whole winter. In fact, Isaac couldn't remember a time he'd enjoyed another's company so much.

Mr. Allen, however, didn't respond right away.

Isaac stood and slapped Mr. Allen on the shoulder. "Come now, let us sit down to a game of cards. A little fun, some good conversation, and you'll soon forget all about Lady Nightingale."

Mr. Allen lifted a single eyebrow. "You're undoubtedly correct there."

"Then let us find a couple of other men as eager for low wagers as we are, and we'll have a jolly good time of it."

Isaac started toward where Robins was watching a game of hazard. No doubt they could prevail upon him to join.

Mr. Allen fell into step beside him, readjusting his glasses. "I feel I should let you know that I don't plan to stay in Carlaby much longer."

Isaac pulled to a stop. "What?" His friend was leaving? When had he chosen to do so?

Mr. Allen shrugged. "Business is going well"—his eyes flitted over toward Lord Oakley—"and I'm not sure I can take advantage of my cousin's good nature for much longer."

Isaac scowled. He had seen Mr. Allen and Lord Oakley in conversation when he'd first entered. Perhaps the two were in business together? Strange, he would have thought Mr. Allen would have mentioned such a thing before now.

"I am happy for you," Isaac said, though the thought of losing such a good friend did dampen the festive mood quite a lot. "You must stay in touch after you leave." Isaac shook himself. "Well, then, if you are about to leave us, I insist you stay and play a while at least."

Hopefully, after a few games, Isaac, too, could again find his holiday cheer.

Chapter 15



ISAAC, with Aunt Margarette on his arm, reached one side of the long, though empty ballroom, and slowly spun about, giving his aunt plenty of time to keep in step beside him. She seemed to lean more heavily on him the longer they walked. He agreed that doing what the doctor had instructed was important, but he didn't want Aunt Margarette pushing so hard that she hurt herself.

"Did the doctor tell you how far you needed to walk each day?" he asked.

"Already worn out?" Aunt Margarette said, and though he could hear the tease in her voice, it sounded more winded that he felt it ought to.

He also knew better than to mention it. "I am only curious."

She shot him a glance that told him she knew exactly why he was asking. "The doctor insists I take a turn about each day, but only ever said not to make it too short." She stopped then, breathing heavily.

Maybe he was pushing her to walk too fast? Isaac slowed his step a bit. "I am at your disposal. Just tell me when you'd like to return to the drawing room."

She nodded. "Perhaps we ought to return now. I can walk further later today."

"If you wish it. Only, let me know when you want to walk again, and I'll accompany you." He didn't like the thought of her taking a turn about the empty ballroom alone. Suppose she fell? She'd specifically asked to walk in this room, saying it was the longest room in the house and she didn't like turning around every three steps. But it was also a bit removed from the main living spaces; if she hurt herself and cried out, no one would hear her for some time.

"I should very much like the company," Aunt Margarette said as they crossed into the corridor and turned their steps toward the drawing room. "If you aren't otherwise busy." She gave him a knowing smile.

Did they have plans later today? Isaac searched his memory but recalled nothing. Reaching the drawing room, Isaac helped his aunt into a seat comfortably near the hearth.

"Is something happening that I've forgotten?" he asked, taking the

seat across from her.

"I happen to know that Lady Nightingale is at home today, is all."

Why would he care if she were at home or not? More to the point, why would Aunt Margarette *think* he cared?

And yet, at the sound of Lady Nightingale's name, his chest warmed, and he suddenly felt almost lightheaded. Thoughts of their kiss had hardly left him these past few days, and they never failed to bring with them the same heady desire he'd felt at the Christmas Day ball.

"I think you ought to call on her," Aunt Margarette said with a smile that looked a little too knowing for Isaac's taste.

"I don't see how you came to that conclusion," Isaac said, shifting about in his seat and leaning his elbows on the armrests.

"I only think you ought to take a little time to sit with her, talk with her, and see if she isn't quite different than you've assumed."

What a strange notion.

And yet . . . was Mr. Allen not proof that every individual related to Mr. Grant didn't have to be as duplicitous as he'd been?

What if he *had* misjudged Lady Nightingale?

Isaac ran a hand across his chin. But Mr. Allen was a distant cousin. Lady Nightingale had been raised by Mr. Grant.

"Even if I did misjudge her," Isaac said at length, "I don't see the point of me going to call on her."

"Perhaps you will finally be able to make peace with what happened in your youth." Aunt Margarette picked up her needlepoint. "Or perhaps you will find something . . . more."

The memory of Lady Nightingale in his arms, snowflakes melting against her skin, came back with such force Isaac had to blink several times to remain in the present.

"If I did visit Evergreen Cottage," he found himself saying, "it would be to see Mr. Allen, not his cousin."

"Of course," Aunt Margarette said, her smile growing.

"I'm in earnest," he insisted. "Mr. Allen is acquitting the neighborhood soon, and I'll be most sorry to see him go."

"Then you ought to visit him before he leaves."

Yes, he ought to. Isaac pressed to a stand, suddenly eager to be gone.

Though he couldn't tell if he was more eager to speak with Mr. Allen again or to see Lady Nightingale. Not that he would ever admit such aloud.

"You're sure you'll be all right if I go?" he asked Aunt Margarette. She seemed to grow a bit older with every passing day. He half-wondered how he would ever convince himself to leave his aunt when the holiday was over. Especially when they'd grown so fond of one

another, and she was looking quite frail.

"I have all the help I need at only the pull of a bell. You run along."

Isaac hesitated, but only for a moment. The draw of Evergreen Cottage seemed to have securely wrapped its way around him in the last couple of minutes and now would not let him go. He bid his aunt farewell and hurried out to don his greatcoat and have his horse brought around.



Lord Oakley did call on Alice, just as he'd told Mr. Allen he would.

As he sat across from her, Alice's mind whirled and spun, taking in each turn of phrase, each subtle movement he made, and assessing it. Lord Oakley was quite polite, very polished. More still, his smile held a bit of warmth—something her late husband's smile never had.

Day before last, she'd not learned as much about Lord Oakley while playing cards with Lord Brooks, Lord Robins, and Lord Sempill as she would have liked, but she had learned some things. Lord Oakley was the oldest in a family that contained three daughters and four sons. Alice couldn't even imagine what a handful that must have been for Lord Oakley's mother.

He was generally liked and highly respected. He was not known to lose fortunes at cards nor take on with unsavory company. All in all, he seemed quite the sort of man she'd been searching for this whole Christmas season.

And yet, her heart refused to be affected. Stubborn organ.

"My brother is finding Oxford much to his liking," Lord Oakley said. "It seems going into the church will suit him quite well after all."

Alice smiled. "That is good to hear." But her smile felt like the one she'd worn for years among society—polite and poised but far from sincere. It wasn't at all the smile she'd worn while playing cards with Lord Brooks or building a snowman with him. It certainly wasn't like the smile she'd fought to hide when they'd been caught beneath the mistletoe.

"Did the late Lord Hoskins attend Oxford, or was he a Cambridge man?"

The question surprised Alice, and she froze, her cup of tea halfway to her mouth.

"I only ask," Lord Oakley hurried on, "because I was wondering if you're set on having your son attend one university or another. If you aren't, I would highly recommend Oxford."

Alice's shoulders eased a bit. Of all the men who'd ever come to call on her, he was the first to mention her son. Most gentlemen

seemed to prefer to ignore his existence. Not only that, but Lord Oakley was asking her opinion.

"The late Lord Hoskins attended Oxford as well." Which was why Alice was leaning toward sending her son to Cambridge. "But nothing is decided upon as of yet."

He nodded pleasantly. "Either option would be a fine choice, I'm sure."

Alice liked his easy manner and even more that he hadn't jumped to the assumption that a man needed to make a decision for her.

And yet, her heart still felt nothing.

The door swung open abruptly and Joseph came tearing into the room. He ran directly up to her, taking her hand, and bouncing it up and down.

"Lord Brooks is here," he said excitedly. "I saw him from the nursery window. Can he make a snowman with me again?"

Lord Brooks—here?

Heat skittered over her chest and cheeks. Alice tightened her jaw and willed her composure back into place. He would be here to see Mr. Allen, not Lady Nightingale.

Lord Oakley sat his cup of tea down and leaned forward. "This must be the very young man we were discussing."

Alice put a hand on Joseph's shoulder, hoping that would calm him a bit, and then introduced her son to the man sitting across from her. Joseph, blessedly, acted quite civil, bowing most respectably and giving Lord Oakley a sweet welcome.

The well-polished young man disappeared almost immediately, however, when Joseph turned back to Alice once more.

"Please?" he begged. "I want to build another snowman."

Their first snowman from the week prior was nothing but a mound of half-melted snow now. But they hadn't received any more snowfall these past few days. "There isn't enough snow outside, I'm afraid." Moreover, she wasn't about to impose upon Lord Brooks a second time, no matter that building another snowman with him and Joseph did sound far too alluring. "I'm sure Lord Brooks is quite busy, too."

Joseph placed an elbow on her lap, resting his small head in an upturned hand, and frowned.

A happy bark announced Ponto had also entered the room. He trotted over to Joseph, then caught sight of Lord Oakley. The young dog stopped, pointed his nose in the direction of the gentleman, and let out a small growl.

"Is this your dog, Lord Hoskins?" Lord Oakley asked, smiling down at Ponto regardless.

A new voice came from the parlor room door—one that sent Alice's heart flipping. "His name is Ponto."

The dog sprang toward Lord Brooks and yipped happily, his tail wagging. Lord Brooks spoke warmly toward the dog as he petted him.

Joseph hurried over to the gentleman as well, taking his hand. “Can you build a snowman with me?”

“Joseph,” Alice scolded softly. “I already told you. Lord Brooks is certainly much too busy.”

Lord Brooks simply went down on one knee, bringing himself eye level with the boy. “We had quite a lot of fun before, didn’t we?”

Joseph nodded emphatically.

“Unfortunately, there isn’t enough snow just now to build a suitable snowman.”

“That’s what Mama said,” Joseph grumbled.

Lord Brooks’s gaze swept over and met Alice’s. “Well, your mama is right.”

Joseph’s shoulders dropped. “Come on, Ponto, let’s go back to the nursery.”

“Tell you what,” Lord Brooks said as the two moved toward the door. “It looks like it might snow again in the next couple of days. If it does, I’ll come over and build a snowman with you.”

Joseph brightened a bit and left the parlor with a smile on his face.

Alice couldn’t help but smile as well. Truly, was there anything more wonderful than knowing someone else also cared for your child?

Lord Brooks was still smiling as his gaze met hers once more.

The instant heat between them was electric, sending shocks of yearning coursing through her. Alice drew in a long breath and forced her gaze away. Hadn’t they just talked about this day before last? Lord Brooks was interested only in marrying for money. More still, he would never be interested in forming a connection with the daughter of Mr. Grant.

Just then, Mrs. Clarke hurried into the room, another tea pot in her hands. “Hot water, in case you want to brew up more tea,” she said, then rested the pot next to the first.

“Thank you,” Alice said softly to her, welcoming the distraction.

As the elderly woman left the room, Alice pasted back on her social poise. “Lord Oakley, you are already acquainted with Lord Brooks, I believe?”

“Yes, we’ve met on occasion,” Lord Oakley said, and the two exchanged greetings.

Unfortunately, their greetings were short in nature and didn’t provide Alice nearly enough time to right her upended equilibrium.

“I am sorry you have come,” she said to Lord Brooks.

Only after the words left her mouth did she realize how rude she’d been. Hang her sudden agitation.

“Forgive me,” she rushed to add. “I only meant that Mr. Allen is

not here, at present, and I am certain you wished to see him."

"Do you know Lady Nightingale's cousin well, then?" Lord Oakley asked.

Lord Brooks nodded. "We have come to know one another quite well this Christmas. Indeed, I find him to be the best man of my acquaintance."

Good heavens.

When he spoke like that, his voice deep and sincere, it positively turned her to soup.

"He feels the same about you, Lord Brooks," Alice found herself confessing.

Lord Brooks's brow dropped, however. "I am sad to hear he will be leaving Carlaby soon."

Right. Mr. Allen was "leaving" because Alice found she couldn't keep up the charade any longer. In all her efforts, only Lord Oakley had shown himself to be worthy of forming a connection—either she made one with him or she and Joseph moved on to another estate and tried all over again.

Well, Lord Brooks was certainly worthy of Joseph's admiration, and she didn't doubt that whatever woman finally secured his affection would know happiness and respect all her life. But he wasn't interested in her, nor was he ever likely to be.

"Actually," Lord Brooks said, suddenly appearing a bit nervous, "if Mr. Allen isn't here, may I stay and visit with you for a bit? Before going back out in the cold, I mean."

He wished to stay and visit . . . with her?

How unexpected. And completely unnerving.

Still, Alice kept enough of her wits about her to motion toward an empty seat, which he took.

"Would you care for tea?" she asked.

"Thank you, yes."

Alice focused on pouring his tea and settling her racing heart.

"I trust your aunt is still in good health?" Lord Oakley asked Lord Brooks.

"She is well enough," he replied.

For several minutes, the two men talked about the health of various family members, but Alice heard very little of it. She was too bent on steadying her mind and nerves.

At the first pause in the conversation, Lord Oakley stood. "I feel I have used up enough of your time, Lady Nightingale, and I should be off."

"Thank you for your visit." The words fell from her mouth without thought.

"Perhaps I might be permitted to call again in a few days' time?"

She ought to feel elated that he wished to return and further their acquaintance. She ought to be quite joyful at the notion.

But she wasn't.

Thankfully, decades of practice at being polite did not fail her. "I look forward to the day." It wasn't as though she *dis*liked him. Most likely, given a bit more time, she would find him quite the best man for her life.

With a bow, Lord Oakley took his leave and was soon out the parlor door. The closing of the front door echoed shortly after.

And then Alice was alone with Lord Brooks.

As herself, not as Mr. Allen.

It was a strange situation. One that made her heart beat painfully against her ribs and her head spin as though caught in a whirlwind. The quiet that stretched on between them was not helping either.

Alice picked up her teacup once more, grasping at anything they might speak on. "How are things between Lord Parsons and Miss Turner?"

"Quite well, as of late."

"Has her mother's health improved enough that he has been able to offer for her then?"

Lord Brooks's expression showed surprise. "How did you know about that?"

She looked up at him—had he already forgotten they'd discussed his friend at length only a few days ago?

Oh, gracious. That was a conversation he'd shared with Mr. Allen, not with Lady Nightingale. She was about to bungle this horribly if she wasn't more careful.

"My cousin mentioned it in passing. I apologize if he wasn't supposed to say anything."

"That is quite all right. It wouldn't do for gossip to spread around the neighborhood, but I am fairly certain the young lady already knows why Parsons has come to Carlaby."

"They seem quite well-suited to one another," Alice said, taking a sip of tea. At least, for the brief moment she'd seen the two together while standing below the mistletoe with Lord Brooks, they'd appeared to be made for one other. Then again, she'd been rather distracted at the time, so perhaps she'd missed something obvious.

"I couldn't agree more," Lord Brooks said, his smile growing sincere. "Miss Turner will be good for my friend, and I am confident he shall be good to her as well."

"I'm happy to hear it." At the thought of Lord Parsons and Miss Turner in love and looking forward to a cheerful life together, a sudden melancholy settled deep in her chest. Alice placed her teacup on the low table between her and Lord Brooks. "Do you ever

wonder . . . what that would feel like?"

"What *what* would feel like?"

"Marrying. For love."

He didn't respond, but neither did his gaze leave her face. He seemed to be studying her, trying to decipher if she was in earnest or not.

At the silence, Alice grew quite self-aware. Who talks about love with a man who can barely tolerate her presence? If she had been Mr. Allen, it would not have been so startlingly out of place. As it was, she was Lady Nightingale, and Lady Nightingale and Lord Brooks were not close enough friends for such a topic.

Alice glanced about for a change of topic. The room was filled with lovely pictures, a fine rug, and comfortable furniture. She'd never found the space lacking before. But now, the room seemed desperately lacking in topics of conversation. She continued to look over the room, fully aware that Lord Brooks still watched her, and her gaze fell upon the hearth. The fire had gone dreadfully low.

"Forgive me," she said, hurriedly standing. "The room no doubt feels frightfully cold to you."

She certainly didn't feel cold. Embarrassment did a terribly good job of keeping a person warm. All the same, she'd hate for him to be uncomfortable.

Alice moved toward the fire, intent to stoke it up a bit.

"Surely it would be more fitting for a lady of your station to simply ring for a maid," Lord Brooks said.

It was a relief he was willing to speak on something other than her bungled confession—but that didn't mean she was willing to walk away from the hearth and give up her one diversion.

"I don't mind," she said over her shoulder. She kept talking, wishing to fill the space with something other than the memory of what she'd just voiced aloud. Alice grabbed a poker and jabbed it at the largest log in the fire. It sparked but didn't roll over. "I chose not to bring many of the staff to Evergreen with me, which I'm afraid means those I have brought are quite busy." She jabbed at the log again, this time lodging the poker in the wood and pushing hard against it. It was heavier than it looked, however, and Alice had to bend in low to get the right leverage. "I'd hate to pull a maid away from whatever she's doing," her words came out strained, "for something so simple as turning over the wood in the hearth."

The log rolled over, sending a slew of sparks flying, showering around her. Several landed across her cheeks and eyes. Alice let out a small scream at the burning, dropped the poker, and shut her eyes. She angled her head away from the fire, but the burning would not stop.

“Lady Nightingale.” Lord Brooks was at her side, his hand on her arm. “Are you all right?”

She shook her head. Her eyes watered, but the pain did not subside. “Ashes,” she managed to get out. “In my eyes.”

A cloth was pressed against her face, but it was dry and only rubbed the hot ashes further into her skin.

Alice pulled away. “There’s water in the second teapot.”

She felt Lord Brooks leave her side. The ashes were not as hot as they’d originally been, but they still agitated and burned against her eyes.

The cloth, wet this time, pressed against her eyes once more. Lord Brooks held her chin softly in her hand as he worked. The relief was immediate. Alice relaxed as Lord Brooks brushed the ashes away from first one eye then the other. The water was no longer hot, and indeed it felt quite cool in contrast to the ashes of the fireplace.

Alice held quite still, the sensation of the cloth moving across her face holding all her attention. She could sit here for hours on end, the calming, rhythmic brush of cloth against her skin. Alice wasn’t a fool, however. It wasn’t just any cloth that would elicit such a reaction in her chest. No, it was Lord Brooks standing in front of her, seeing that she was all right, that caused such a response.

He didn’t stop with just her eyes; he wiped away any traces of ash across her cheek bones, then her nose, all while his hand stayed beneath her chin. Eventually, he stopped.

The burning had completely eased, and Alice blinked her eyes back open.

Lord Brooks was looking directly into her eyes—but it wasn’t a look of admiration, of longing, or even of desire . . . all emotions Alice recognized as her own.

Instead, he looked furious.

Alice rocked back slightly at the rage in his gaze.

He took hold of her hand and all but threw his wet handkerchief into it. “I might have known,” he muttered under his breath.

Alice opened her mouth to ask what he meant, but the words died atop her tongue. She had a sinking feeling she knew exactly what he meant.

Lord Brooks spun around and marched out of the room.

Alice wanted to run after him, wanted to stop him before he left. But her feet refused to obey. Her entire being seemed frozen as though she’d been left out in the winter cold all night. Only after she heard the front door slam shut did she feel air enter her lungs once more.

He knew.

Heaven help her, Lord Brooks knew.

But how? What had finally given her away? Alice’s hand squeezed

around the wet handkerchief in her hand. Tiny, cold rivulets of water flowed over her fingers. With brow creased, she hurried to the far side of the room and looked at herself in the mirror hanging on the wall.

Freckles.

Dozens of freckles stood out across her cheeks and nose. Alice shut her eyes and leaned her forehead against the icy glass. How could she have been so stupid? Why hadn't she simply summoned a maid to stoke the fire?

It didn't matter now.

Lord Brooks knew she'd been dressing up as Mr. Allen all along. What must he think of her? She'd so wanted him to hold her in high esteem—if not Lady Nightingale, at least Mr. Allen—and now . . . this. Alice shook her head while it was still pressed against the mirror. Everything she'd tried to do. Everything she'd tried to *hide*.

It was all over now.

Chapter 16



ISAAC STOOD BEFORE THE HEARTH, seeing nothing but the fire licking the air . . . and the way Lady Nightingale's face had looked all scrunched up with ashes across her cheekbones and eyes. The way her expression had soothed beneath his hand, and the surprise and horror when she'd realized he knew.

Lady Nightingale had been Mr. Allen all along.

Devil take him. Why hadn't he seen it from the start?

Mr. Allen's boyish face, the clear lack of whiskers no matter the time of day, the thin frame. How had he been so completely taken in—*again*—by a Grant? Isaac ground his jaw and shut his eyes. He knew she'd be trouble the moment he'd learned who she was. He should have followed his initial instinct and steered clear of Lady Nightingale and her supposed cousin.

As frustrated as he was at Lady Nightingale, he was equally upset with himself. It was his own fault he'd been duped. He'd known better, and yet, he'd allowed himself to become friends with Mr. Allen. He'd allowed himself to wonder if Lady Nightingale wasn't quite different from her father. Well, she'd certainly shown him that such was *not* the case. She was her father's daughter, through and through.

"There you are," Aunt Margarette said, leaning heavily on a cane as she moved into the room. "We best be going if we don't want to be late."

Isaac nodded but didn't move otherwise.

Aunt Margarette moved up beside him and rested a hand on his arm. "Are you *certain* you are all right?"

She'd asked him that same question countless times since he'd stormed back into Cresthearth Manor three days ago. She asked whenever another letter from Evergreen arrived; Lady had Nightingale said she wished to explain, but he wasn't willing to listen. She asked whenever he turned agitated at Parsons expounding on how thrilled he was Mrs. Turner was recovering and Miss Turner had accepted his hand. She asked whenever he stayed silent too long or stared out the window at the drifting snow. He didn't tell her that his mind too easily moved to building a snowman, to dozens of engaging

conversations, and to one wholly upending kiss.

He still couldn't believe he hadn't put the pieces together before now.

"Most women wore white paint on their faces when you were younger, right?" he asked, fully aware that the question would appear out of the blue to his aunt.

Sure enough, her eyes widened slightly. "Yes, it was all the rage when I first had my coming out."

"I always imagined it would be easy to tell if a woman wore paint or not. Is that not the case?"

Aunt Margarette still appeared confused, but blessedly answered. "Normally that was true. But once in a while, there would be a woman with the right receipt and the right skill and no one—sometimes not even her own husband—would suspect she wore white paint."

Isaac pulled his lips to the side. Apparently, either Lady Nightingale herself held such a talent, or someone close to her did.

"Why the questions regarding women's white paint?" Aunt Margarette asked.

"No reason, just random curiosity." She wouldn't believe it—he knew her too well to assume otherwise. But with any luck, she wouldn't press the point either. Just to be safe, however, Isaac extended his arm her direction. "You are right; we'd best be off immediately. Parsons would never forgive me if I showed up late to his engagement party."

Soon, Isaac, Aunt Margarette, and Robins were all sitting in a fine coach. The drive to the Turners' home was short, and though snow fell, it was light and proved no real danger.

"I expect Miss Dowding will be in attendance tonight," Robins said, wagging his eyebrows Isaac's direction.

Would she be? He hadn't really considered it. "I suppose so," he said.

Robins studied him closely. "Now that Parsons has spoken for his lady, you'd best do so soon as well."

He could feel not only Robins's careful eye on him, but Aunt Margarette's as well. He might as well tell them; it wasn't as though it would be a secret for long. "I have decided not to pursue a match with Miss Dowding."

"Oh?" Aunt Margarette exclaimed while, at the same time, Robins said, "You what?"

Did they really have to get into this right now? He was rather preoccupied with other matters. Still, the look on their faces told him he wasn't getting out so easily. Isaac drew in a breath and faced them. "I can no longer deny that my heart truly isn't engaged in the

furthering of our connection, and to seek one regardless would make me . . . a fortune hunter." The words he'd shared with Lady Nightingale a couple of days after he'd kissed her hadn't left him. All she'd said about fortune hunters and what it felt like to be married to a man who'd only wanted her wealth. Granted, he'd thought he was speaking to a gentleman—to Mr. Allen—at the time. But what she'd said had struck him forcibly that day.

Once he learned of Mr. Allen's true identity, her words had carried even more weight.

Through his association with Lady Nightingale, especially his conversations with Mr. Allen, Isaac had come to find a marriage of convenience held no interest for him. He wasn't the same person, and he could no longer do what he'd set out to accomplish.

Isaac cast his aunt a sideways glance—those in this carriage weren't exactly free of blame either.

"I suppose," he said at length, since both his companions were clearly waiting for more of a reply, "the thought of marrying only for wealth has lost its gleam."

"What *are* you planning to marry for then?" Robins asked, disbelief heavy in his tone. "For poverty's sake?"

Isaac took his aunt's hand and wrapped it around his arm. "For love."

His aunt let out a small laugh, pulled him closer to her, and kissed him on the cheek. "I knew you would see reason."

Isaac hugged her closer to him. She *had* influenced him quite a bit this Christmas. He'd only come here because her home was so near the Turner's. If only he'd known then how dear to him she'd become. He felt a bit of guilt well up in him at the thought of all the years he'd never come to visit. Well, that would change now. They were family, and he was determined she would not be lonely again.

"I think you're loony," Robins said.

Aunt Margarette sat up straight, lifted her hand, and brought her reticule down atop Robins's knee. It hit hard enough to leave a *smack* ringing through the carriage.

"It's Christmas, and I'll not have you—or anyone—ruining this moment for me."

Robins's eyes were wide as he rubbed at his knee.

Isaac muffled his laugh; apparently his aunt wasn't so weak and feeble as she sometimes let on. Either that, or she had a far stronger devotion to the concept of love than even he'd realized.

Either way, Robins kept quiet the rest of the carriage ride, then bolted out into the night the minute they arrived.

The house had been fully decorated for the occasion. Boughs of holly and evergreen were strewn about every wall, doorway, and

banister. The smell of pine reminded him painfully of the night he'd first laid eyes on Lady Nightingale. Of the way she danced. Of the way her eyes had sparked with joy and intelligence.

He'd always looked at those eyes and known there was more happening inside her mind than she was telling. Had he not warned Robins away from the beginning? Would that he had heeded his own advice.

Then, as though materializing out of thin air, Lady Nightingale moved up beside him. Parsons had mentioned the Turners would be inviting her. Isaac had almost opened his mouth and told all her secrets to his friend then and there. But not a single word ever made it out of his mouth. In the end, he truly couldn't humiliate Lady Nightingale, no matter what she'd done.

"Good evening, Lord Brooks," she said, as politely as ever. Not at all as though he knew exactly what she'd been doing these past many weeks. She must have been wearing white paint once more, for not a single freckle showed across her nose or cheeks. Wait, no, there was a single one, poking out just beneath her ear—and Isaac knew a sudden and intense desire to reach out and touch the spot, trail his thumb across her jaw line, pull her in closer . . .

He mentally shook himself even while inclining his head slightly. "Lady Nightingale." Could she not have had the decency to stay home tonight, no matter that she'd been invited? Could she not have at least had the decency to dress in something a bit more drab? Her plum ball gown coupled with her hair so delicately arranged atop her head was far too alluring for his sense of equilibrium to stand. And how did she get her hair to look like that? Mr. Allen's hair was a bit long for a truly masculine cut, but it certainly wasn't in long tresses.

"Aunt Margarette," Lady Nightingale said, turning to his aunt who was still hanging heavily on his arm. "I am pleased to see you as well."

Isaac blinked a few times and forced his eyes away from her completely. He didn't know how she'd pulled off having long hair some times and short hair other times, but neither did he care.

"A fine night for an engagement party, is it not?" his aunt replied.

"Very fine, indeed," Lady Nightingale said, her gaze immediately returning to him. Though he didn't look at her directly, he could see out of the corner of his eye that she was looking at him quite hopefully. Or, perhaps more accurately, he could *feel* her looking at him.

"Isaac," Aunt Margarette said, tugging on his arm, "would you help me over to a seat just there? Then you and this beautiful lady can have a proper talk. I don't feel up to standing much longer just now."

Blast, he was ignoring his aunt's needs. He simply had to find a

way to stop being so affected by Lady Nightingale. Isaac quickly agreed and walked his aunt over to a chair. She sat down slowly, each bend appearing painful. Isaac had never felt more anxious to leave a place than he was ready to leave Carlaby now. And yet, watching his aunt lower herself stiffly into the seat, he still hesitated. He couldn't stay, and yet he couldn't leave either.

Perhaps he could convince her to leave Carlaby with him? Though where they'd go, he wasn't sure.

Comfortably seated, Aunt Margarette patted his hand. "Now, you return to Lady Nightingale's side and have a lovely little chat with her. Or better yet, ask her to dance the next set with you."

Isaac lifted an eyebrow. "I thought you didn't like Lady Nightingale."

She huffed. "I never said such a thing."

No, she hadn't, not directly. But Aunt Margarette had been no supporter of Lady Nightingale when he'd first come to Carlaby. Why the dear old woman had changed her tune was a conundrum—one he had no desire to sort out.

Still, he took the few steps back toward Lady Nightingale. To leave her standing there would be a slight, and though he didn't care for her company, he didn't wish to humiliate her or show himself to be anything less than a proper gentleman.

Before she could say anything, Isaac spoke. "It has been very nice seeing you again tonight. But if you will excuse me, I have something I wish to say to Parsons." With a proper farewell, he could at least leave her and trust no gossip would continue to tie their names together.

Isaac turned to leave, but Lady Nightingale stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"Please," she said softly. "Can't you at least allow me to explain?"

That was the last thing Isaac wanted to hear. Her "explanation" would no doubt be filled with heart-tugging half-truths, the kind that made a man willing to believe.

"No." Isaac finally found his voice. "I think not." If spending time with her was akin to holding a snake in his arms, listening to her tale would be like allowing the snake to bite. It was welcoming poison into his ears, and it would no doubt find its way directly into his heart.

"You must know it was never my intention for anyone to get hurt," she explained, regardless of his words.

"Was it not?" he shot back. "Tell me then, what were your intentions? To pull the wool over my eyes just as your father did?" Now that he'd began to speak, the words rushed from him, unwilling to stop or even hesitate. "Well, congratulations; someday when you leave this earth and join your father, you may report back to him that

you bamboozled me every bit as effectively as he did."

She stared up at him in silence. Her eyes were rimmed with red, and if he didn't know better, he'd think she appeared to be close to tears.

Isaac gave her a stiff bow, then spun on his heel and marched away. He had a good friend who was celebrating tonight, and Isaac wasn't about to allow Lady Nightingale to ruin things for him—or anyone else. If she cried, it was purely because of her own wickedness. He wouldn't give her another thought. She deserved no backward glance, no reassurance.

And yet, if that were true, why the blazes did he feel so guilty?

Chapter 17



ISAAC SNAPPED the newspaper open and held it up, blocking his view of Greenbulls and the many gentlemen filling the space. *Mr. Allen* wasn't among them. Not that he was looking for *her*, but his eyes had searched the room all the same. Lady Nightingale wouldn't have the gall to show up as her own cousin, not now that he'd found her out. If he'd had any inkling that she would be here today, he wouldn't have come.

He hadn't yet scrubbed the guilt off himself at seeing her nearly cry a few nights before.

Isaac straightened the paper in his hand—he wasn't here to dwell on her or any of that which had passed between them. He was here to enjoy a winter afternoon in comfort with news of the world to keep him company.

A ripple of welcomes told Isaac that some new gentleman had entered the club. He didn't care, though. He wasn't in the mood to smile and wish another a jolly holiday.

"I was led to believe you would be leaving us soon." Robins's voice carried over the others.

"Soon, but not quite yet." At the sound of the far too familiar voice, Isaac's hands tightened into fists, crumpling the newspaper.

What the blazes was she doing here?

Though he kept his paper up, he could feel her moving through the room, drawing nearer to him. He hadn't laid eyes on her since Parsons's engagement party, and yet he was aware of each step she took.

She stopped directly before him.

"Good day to you," came her firm Mr. Allen voice.

Isaac slowly lowered the paper. She looked exactly as he'd seen her so many times: hair short and perfectly styled in a very masculine fashion atop her head, a suit well-tailored to hide her curves, a walking cane in her hand, fake sideburns down either side of her face, glasses atop her nose, and freckles. Oh, so many freckles. Knowing now that he was indeed looking at *Lady Nightingale* did strange things inside him. He simultaneously despised the charade and ached to pull her closer. To study her eyes and see the woman just behind the mask

of a man. To trail his thumb across her jaw and possibly kiss each freckle.

Gads, he could not be thinking about kissing her right now. He was angry, confused, and hurt that she would lie to him so completely.

Isaac folded his paper, pulling on it most harshly. “Mr. Allen,” he greeted her, his words tight. Only after he tossed the folded paper down on a nearby table did Isaac realize she wasn’t alone.

Two men stood just behind Lady Nightingale. With the three of them looking down at him, he felt rather like a man hunted by a posse. The first man he didn’t recognize. But the second—lud, it was his own man of business. What in heavens name was Lady Nightingale up to now? Turning his own men against him, same as her father had?

“You have been ignoring my letters,” Lady Nightingale said, clasping her hands behind her back. Where had she learned to *act* like a man so convincingly? Now that he saw her thus again, he realized it wasn’t just her voice and appearance that had fooled him, it was her every mannerism, too.

“And if I have?” he replied. It was true, all the same. He *had* been ignoring her letters. The first had come in her own handwriting and had been signed with her own name. The later ones had come in a far more masculine hand and had been signed *Mr. Allen*. He’d done no more than glance, regardless of as whom she’d written to him.

Her lips pinched, and he found he couldn’t look away. “There is a business matter of highest importance we must discuss,” she said. “The owner here said we might use a side room. If you’ll follow us.”

Oh, now she wasn’t even giving him the option of turning her down?

Still, despite all his frustrations and confusion, he stood and silently followed the two men who proceeded after her. She certainly wasn’t one who was afraid to take control of a situation, that much he’d grant her. Begrudgingly grant her. Just as he begrudgingly had to admit, if only to himself, that there was something wholly bewitching about watching her stride around a gentlemen’s club in breeches and a jacket.

She opened a door off the main room and allowed everyone to pass in before her. It struck him again how far she’d stretched outside of what was expected of a lady—a peer in her own right, no less—to pull off this ruse.

There was a long table in the center of the room with nearly a dozen chairs circling it. Three large windows on the far wall lit the space comfortably, as did the small fire in the hearth.

The men who accompanied Lady Nightingale sat, facing one another across the table. Lady Nightingale took the seat beside the man Isaac didn’t know even as his own man of business motioned for

Isaac to take the seat beside him. He did, and it placed him facing Lady Nightingale, as Mr. Allen, directly.

"I am here on behalf of my cousin, Lady Nightingale," she began.

It was strange hearing her talk about herself—and yet the words rolled off her tongue. No doubt, she was used to the paradox now. Isaac's mind flitted back to the many conversations they'd had. Not many had included Lady Nightingale in topic, but a few had. Remembering them made his stomach sour with humiliation all over again. The things he'd said to her very face. The urging for other men to steer clear of her. The insinuations that she was here merely to play with the hearts of the gentlemen.

Yet, she had been deceiving them all this whole time. So in that regard, at least, he'd been correct.

His man of business, Mr. Stanley, cleared his throat, bringing Isaac back to the present. The other man Isaac had yet to meet was introducing himself as Mr. Backston, Lady Nightingale's man of business. This truly was a matter of business then, if she'd gone through all the trouble to bring not only Stanley all the way to Carlaby but her own man as well.

"Lady Nightingale has informed me," Backston continued, "that she's given her cousin, Mr. Allen, full permission to sign for her today and to make decisions on her behalf."

Isaac's gaze found *Mr. Allen*, and he watched her closely. Of course Lady Nightingale had given her cousin permission.

She didn't flinch beneath his gaze but held it in return. Her face was nearly devoid of expression, and yet he thought he could see a hint of uncertainty beneath her calm facade. A hint of hope, too.

He recognized it, for somewhere deep inside himself, he was feeling the same.

"I will get straight to the point," Backston said, pulling out a stack of papers which he spread onto the table before him. "It has come to her ladyship's attention that you, Lord Brooks, sold a valuable estate to her father little more than a decade ago."

This was about Langdon Hall? Now Backston had Isaac's full attention.

"She now desires to sell it back," the man continued, his words slowing, "for exactly the same amount which it was originally sold to Mr. Grant."

"What?" Stanley cried out, echoing Isaac's own thoughts.

Backston nodded at their shock. "The estate was never added to the entailment, so it is perfectly legal."

Give him back Langdon Hall, and for nearly nothing? Isaac's gaze jumped back to Lady Nightingale. But she wasn't looking at him anymore. Her mouth was turned downward, and her gaze rested upon

the papers.

"Are you in earnest?" he asked her.

Her gaze flitted to him. "Lady Nightingale feels very sorry over her father's treatment of you, and she wishes to set things right."

Set things right? This would do more than that. This would set him up for good. No more scrimping to get by while scouring London for a wealthy wife. The amount she was asking would not be hard to get his hands on—she was only asking a tenth of what the estate was truly worth. No . . . she was asking a tenth of what it *had* been worth.

"But," he said, "Lady Nightingale has put a lot of work and effort into the estate. Langdon Hall is worth more now than it was when I first sold it to Mr. Grant."

She slowly inclined her head. "Consider it interest paid on allowing her use of the land for a time."

How he wished she didn't have to be Mr. Allen right now. He wanted to hear her say *she* was sorry for what her father had done, that *she* wanted to set things right.

Backston pushed a small stack of papers toward him and Stanley. "If you wish to look things over, please do. But you will find it's all very straightforward."

Stanley took hold of the papers like his very life depended upon him holding them tightly enough. In a manner, these papers did signify life, for Isaac's holdings and wealth anyways. Stanley studied each line.

"You'll want to read them carefully," Lady Nightingale said. "I don't want there to be any question. Lady Nightingale is not her father, and there isn't any hidden clause or disadvantage to you in the deal."

And yet, she'd been lying to him this whole time. Now this? He couldn't understand it.

Stanley finished quickly and turned toward him. "All is in order. It's exactly as they said, an easy purchase. Money for the full estate, exactly as you originally sold it to Mr. Grant."

"And I am at liberty to take possession of it immediately?" Isaac asked, still reeling at the thought of owning Langdon Hall once more. Of owning an estate that generated more than all his other estates combined.

Lady Nightingale inclined her head. "Her ladyship says there is nothing of a personal import at the hall. Everything is exactly as it was when you first sold it. So, yes, you are free to take possession as soon as you wish it."

Which meant he could take possession in time to make Spring decisions.

Isaac ran a hand down his face, glancing over at Stanley. The man

seemed to be staring him down, willing him to accept the offer with every ounce of strength he had inside him. The man's expression nearly made Isaac laugh out loud. This was all so unexpected, he hardly knew *how* to react.

"Then I accept," Isaac said, the words stumbling out of him like a colt trying to walk.

Backston motioned toward the papers. "Just sign where it indicates, and we'll consider the deal finalized."

Isaac couldn't help but marvel that this was all happening so quickly. Normally a sale of this size required months of negotiations. The buyer would need to see the land, ride or walk the border, speak with some of the tenants, stay at the house for a time. The seller would want to know the buyer had the funds necessary, references would have to be consulted, and exact terms would have to be talked about over and over again.

But Isaac already knew the property, knew exactly what he was buying. And even he could afford the small amount Lady Nightingale was asking for payment. A few scratches of ink on paper and the deal was formally agreed upon.

"Thank you for your time, Lord Brooks," Backston said, standing.

Isaac and his own man of business stood, as did Lady Nightingale. The more he saw her in breeches and those ridiculous fake sideburns, the more he could see the woman in the disguise. And, if he were being completely honest with himself, the more he wanted—*needed*—to speak with her.

They all began walking toward the door, the two men of business speaking in low tones as they discussed the act of physically moving monies about. Lady Nightingale seemed willing to look at anything other than him as she reached the door first. Isaac took a couple of long strides and rested a hand lightly on her arm.

She stilled at his touch, her gaze jumping to him, and in that moment, he could see the uncertainty inside her before she looked away once more.

Stanley and Backston hesitated, as decorum demanded they allow Mr. Allen and Lord Brooks to pass through the door first.

Isaac turned their direction. "You gentlemen go ahead; we know you have much to see to just now."

With a few bows and muttered farewells, the two men departed. It was surreal how well Lady Nightingale could bow. It was thoroughly confounding how well she could act the part of a man.

Before she could escape as well, however, Isaac shut the door fully, leaning a heavy hand against it. He turned her direction.

For all her acting, the look she gave him then was all feminine. Or perhaps it was just that he was beginning to see her better. Either

way, her look of unsettled hope worked its way directly into his chest.

"Why are you doing this?" The words burst from him.

Now that they were alone, Mr. Allen seemed to melt away completely. Though she still wore a gentleman's suit, Lady Nightingale's posture shifted as she placed hands on hips and pursed her lips slightly.

"As I said, to make amends for the deeds of my father."

"Is that all?" He needed desperately to know.

"Now you are free." Her words came out slow, stilted, nearly forced. "Free to marry Miss Dowding . . . or any woman of your choosing."

His heart flipped. "Am I?"

Her gaze flitted to the door. "I am sure Mr. Dowding will look far more favorably on your suit now than he would have otherwise."

That wasn't what he'd meant. "It seems you haven't heard. I'm not interested in pursuing Miss Dowding."

Her gaze jumped to his. "Oh?"

"Both my aunt and *Mr. Allen* have shown me that pursing a connection when my heart was not engaged would only make me a fortune hunter. And no matter my financial straits, that was not something I ever wished to be."

"Our deal is completed, my lord," she said, her tone flat. "You cannot back out of purchasing Langdon now." One of her eyebrows ticked upward briefly, the only indication she was teasing.

Isaac let a smile pull his mouth wide. "I suppose I shall have to get used to being well off once more."

"I'm afraid you shall." Her tone finally softened.

They were both silent for a moment. The air about them was wholly silent, and yet there seemed to be a buzz about the space, a whirling change. Isaac looked over the woman before him, the one with short hair and a walking stick, the one with freckles covering her lovely face, and he realized he was ready to hear her out.

"I believe," he said slowly, "that you wished to explain?"

She let out a small guffaw. "Oh, so *now* you're ready to listen?"

She was a breathtaking mixture of feminine loveliness and traditionally masculine forthrightness.

"If you're still willing to explain, yes, I'm willing to listen."

She was silent for a moment, and he could see the thoughts spinning about her head. At length, she moved toward the table once more, leaning back against it.

Isaac knew an intense desire to move toward the table as well, to stand next to her, maybe close enough that their shoulders would touch. But he wasn't ready—wasn't ready to trust her again. If he put himself that close to her, it would be too hard to focus on what she

had to say, and he needed to hear her explanation with as clear a mind as possible just now.

"I did it for Joseph," she said. "And for myself."

"How so?"

She blew at a strand of short hair that had fallen down into her eyes. Perhaps after he asked her *why* she'd carried out the deception he should ask her *how*.

"A few months ago, Joseph started asking for a new father. At first, I put him off, tried to change topics whenever he brought it up. When he insisted, I told him we were getting along well enough as we were and why change things?" A soft smile stole over her lips as she talked. "I even went so far as to buy him Ponto in the hope that the little dog would prove enough of a distraction. One day, purely out of exasperation, I said something ridiculous."

Isaac smiled to himself at the thought of an insistent, curly-haired little boy. "And what was that?"

"I said, 'Maybe Father Christmas will bring you a new papa.'" She cast her gaze heavenward. "Never have I regretted my words more." Her hands went out to either side. "He took my haphazard suggestion as a solemn oath. He's been hoping every day this Christmas that *today* would be the day Father Christmas would arrive with a new man for us." She shook her head, running a hand over the short locks that continued to fall forward.

"That's a charming tale," Isaac said, "but it still doesn't explain why you became Mr. Allen." And, though the desire to hold her, to mend the hurt between them, was swelling into a pulsing ocean inside him, there was still a knot in the pit of his stomach. It was small, but it refused to be moved all the same.

It said this might be yet another manipulation on her part.

It said he couldn't trust her. Not deep down, where it mattered.

"No," she said, her voice softer. "I suppose it doesn't." Her head dropped, her gaze on either her own boots or the floor beneath them. She was quiet for some time. "You knew my father."

"Only what he wished to show me." Wasn't that what Lady Nightingale had done as well? Only shown him what she wished him to see?

"You knew what he was capable of."

Yes, *after* the damage had been done. But he held his tongue at that.

"My father only ever wanted two things in life—wealth and position. The moment I was old enough to be married off, he attached me to the richest man he knew. One with a title who would elevate my father by association. It was my duty as a daughter to provide our family with just such an advantageous connection. My late husband

was not cruel, exactly. But neither was he affectionate." Her brow creased and she finally met his eyes once more. "Let us just say, I did not cry at either of their passings."

What idiots those men had been, to overlook the vibrant, engaging woman Lady Nightingale was.

"This past year has been the best of my life. I am an independent woman, a peer in my own right. I have a darling son, a comfortable home. I wasn't exaggerating when I told Joseph, over and over again, that we are quite fine without a man of the house. But he wouldn't stop insisting." He could hear the exhaustion in her voice. "So, I resolved I would start looking for another husband, but I wasn't willing to go back to the way my life had been. I didn't want to be swept behind a man who only wished for my money or title. I didn't want to—I *couldn't*—return to a life where the gentleman who is supposed to see to my welfare puts on a grand face among society while acting far different behind closed doors."

The pieces were starting to come together in his mind. Mr. Grant had treated him very much the same as what she was describing. He had been all kind and cordial, at first; when among others, he had been honorable and respectable.

"The gentlemen I've known," Lady Nightingale pressed, "were never their complete selves among society. How could I ever trust a man before seeing his true nature?"

"So you dressed in such a way that you could see who they were."

She nodded. "I had to. I *never* meant to hurt anyone. I never would have spread what I've learned in confidence or used it to spoil another's good name. It was only ever a method to guarantee my own safety and the safety of my son. I'm a rich widow; no gentleman was ever going to be honest in his character toward me."

Isaac supposed it made sense. This was for her safety. For her son, too. He couldn't deny her the need to watch over Joseph or herself. The knot in his stomach shifted for the first time since he'd washed the white paint off her face and seen those freckles. He rather preferred her with freckles than without. He also had to admire that she'd go to such lengths for her son. He'd always known she was a brilliant woman; now he also knew she was brave and clever.

"Can you forgive me?" she whispered.

The words weighed on him. He let them hang for a minute, waiting to see how his heart would respond.

It finally did. "Yes."

The tension eased from her face. "Thank you." She moved toward the door. "If you'll excuse me, I have many things to see to today, starting with a message for Lord Oakley."

Isaac placed an arm over the door, barring her exit. "I just

renounced life as a fortune hunter; I cannot allow you to pick up where I left off."

She gave him a sad smile. "I'm not pursuing him any more than you are Miss Dowding. I only wish to tell him I am leaving Carlaby and to thank him for his hospitality while I was here."

Wait . . . that was it? She was leaving? For good?

Isaac reached for her, taking her elbow in hand. She stood so close, and yet he was acutely aware that she was nowhere close enough for his taste. "Please wait, M—" His voice stopped suddenly. "Lud, I can't call you Mr. Allen anymore, but when you're dressed like this," he eyed her up and down, "I can't call you Lady Nightingale."

"Alice," she said, looking up at him with a soft smile. "Just call me Alice."

The name suited her, a bit sweet, a bit spice. "Alice, why in heaven's name are you even considering leaving Carlaby?"

"I'm not considering it, Lord Brooks—"

"Isaac, please."

She paused, her mouth open, her eyes searching his.

At length, she continued. "I'm not considering it, Isaac, I have made up my mind. Staying would prove uncomfortable for many, I'm afraid, myself included."

"Are you certain?" He reached out, taking hold of her glasses, and carefully slipping them off. Her eyes widened, but she didn't pull away. Without spectacles in the way, she was breathtaking. Her freckles and even her short hair mesmerized him. "What if I told you not *every* man was going to pretend around you?"

His arm slipped around her middle, pulling her closer to him. She drew in a breath at his touch but didn't pull away. Quite the opposite, in fact.

"I'd say that wishful thinking doesn't make something real." She rested a hand against his chest, spreading a fire through him.

He leaned in, resting his forehead against hers. How right it felt to hold her. How perfect.

"I have always been only me, and all of me, with you," he said.

"Perhaps you were *while* I was Mr. Allen," she said, her arms slipping around his neck.

"Is that the way you see it? I may have been guarded around Lady Nightingale, less open and prone to telling my darkest secrets—"

"You never told me any dark secrets," she said, a rueful smile turning her delightful pink lips upward.

"What about my dealings with your father?"

"Those were hardly a secret; they were only poorly recorded events."

"You aren't making this easy, do you know that?"

Her eyes sparked with joy.

"Well, *if* I'd had any dark secrets, I might not have told Lady Nightingale because I was worried she would use the knowledge to manipulate me. But I certainly would have told Mr. Allen."

She stilled, her smile falling away. "I'm sorry you didn't know you could trust Lady Nightingale as completely as you trusted Mr. Allen." Her eyes flicked down to his lips and back up again. "You have no idea how many times I have been completely sorry."

"I do know I can trust you now. *All* of you, the Lady Nightingale and the Mr. Allen." Isaac pulled her closer, placing a soft, light kiss on her lips. "You know you can trust me, too, do you not?"

"I am beginning to wonder," she said with humor in her voice, "now that I've sold Langdon Hall back to you, if you aren't manipulating *me* to get more."

Isaac opened his mouth, ready to tease back, but hesitated. There would be time enough for jokes and flirtatious banter later. At least, if things continued the way they were, there would be.

For now, he needed to know that she knew exactly where he stood.

"Alice, you are the most courageous and loving person I know. You care for the people around you, no matter if they are titled guests in your home or the servants who wait on them. You give and you give and for once, you should have a man by your side who works *with* you. Surely you must know, I would never use your title or wealth for selfish purposes."

She looked up at him, her eyes wide. She didn't pull away, and yet he could see that there still was a sliver of hesitancy in her mind. "I want to know," she whispered. "But you would benefit greatly from my wealth. How can I know that you didn't fall in love with it first and me second? That I'll always be second?"

Oh, darling Alice. "Because you know me." He cupped her face in his hands. "Because, as much as I hate that you lied to me, your ridiculous charade worked. You *know* me. All of me. The good, the bad, the impatient and foolhardy. I've been nothing but my honest, complete self around you. You know it all."

Going up on tiptoe, she kissed him softly. "I guess there's nothing to do but admit we trust one another, despite everything."

"I guess so."

Their lips met again, this time in a kiss of passion and hope, of joy and peace. So many seemingly contradictory emotions flooded through Isaac, and yet they all found a home inside him. Every piece settled into place fully. Every dream and ideal, every spark and electric touch. How had he ever lived without this woman? What the blazes had he been thinking when he'd first decided to marry for wealth? What a fool he'd been; and yet, somehow, he'd still found this

vibrant, headstrong woman.

Who was still kissing him, for some glorious reason.

Enjoying it every bit as much as he was, too, if he wasn't mistaken.

Eventually, they pulled back. Her cheeks were flushed, and the smile she gave him was one he hoped to never forget. Probably the best way to make sure it stayed fresh in his mind would be to see it over and over again.

"We'd better go before someone stumbles in here," Alice said. "I'd hate to have kept my secret safe for so long only to have it found out now."

"It is nice that we can stay closed away in this room together, unchaperoned, and not worry about your reputation, though."

She hugged him close. "That is one benefit I had not foreseen."

"Before you go," Isaac said, taking hold of her arms and guiding them around and back in front of him, "there is one other thing I wish to say. A few minutes ago, you said I was free now to marry whomever I desired." He dropped to one knee. "So I'll ask you again, am I? Because I know exactly who I wish to stand by until I grow old. I love you so desperately and so completely that I would give up everything to be with you."

"You love me?"

"An utterly ridiculous amount." He drew in a breath, speaking with as much conviction as he could imbue into his voice. "Alice Nightingale Allen, will you marry me?"

She put a hand to her mouth, staring down at him for several seconds . . . several suddenly uncertain, heavy seconds. Her eyes were large, and all he wanted, all he would ever want, was to know he could look into her lovely face every morning and kiss her soundly every night.

"Yes," she whispered, her voice so soft he wasn't sure at first if he'd heard her correctly. Then her smile reappeared. "Yes, oh please, yes."

Isaac stood, and she veritably threw herself at him. Not that he minded. He would have kissed her if she hadn't kissed him first.

They stayed that way for a while, wrapped in each other's arms. Completely themselves. And completely happy.

Chapter 18



ALICE MOVED into the drawing room and found Joseph kneeling upon the window seat, staring out at the falling snow. She paused near the doorway, looking at her little man. Would he be pleased when he learned the news? She had to believe he would be; after all, he'd very much enjoyed his time with Isaac this season.

Isaac.

She couldn't stop the smile that spread across her face at the mere thought of his name. Oh, and all the glorious kisses yesterday. In Greenbulls, of all places. Alice felt her face grow warm. Part of her was shocked at her own behavior. Part of her, the more insistent part, hoped they could reenact the events over again soon. And if not at the gentlemen's club, then perhaps somewhere closer to home. The *where* didn't matter because she'd finally found the right *who*.

She'd almost told Joseph yesterday evening, after coming home. Though Isaac had been there and taken dinner with them, she'd wanted to sleep on it first. She wanted to know this was right before telling Joseph.

When this morning had dawned . . . well, there was no doubt in her mind.

Not that she was sad she hadn't told him last night. Today was Epiphany, and tonight Twelfth Night. It was the perfect day, and she and Isaac had devised a lovely plan.

"Joseph, dear," Alice said, striding over to him. "What are you looking at?"

"It's snowing again, Mama," he said, shooting her no more than the briefest of glances. Ponto, resting happily near Joseph's feet, didn't even lift his head. "Do you think Lord Brooks would build another snowman with me?"

Joseph had taken to Isaac from the first moment they'd met. She should have followed her heart as quickly as he had. It would have saved her quite a bit of worry. "I believe so."

Joseph's face brightened. "Can you write him? Right now?" He began to bounce on the window seat cushion.

"Well, I'm sure we can—"

The drawing room door opened, and Mrs. Clarke hurried inside.

“There’s someone at the door, my lady, and he’s asking for our young Master Joseph.” It was clear to Alice that the elderly woman was fighting a smile, but blessedly, her years on the stage seemed to be coming back to her, for Joseph appeared to only see her puzzlement.

“For me?” he asked.

“Yes, and what a man he is,” Mrs. Clarke continued. “A great big red coat, all trimmed with fur. And my, the biggest bag of presents hanging off his shoulder I’ve ever seen.”

Joseph’s eyes went wide. “Father Christmas!” He darted from the room, heading toward the entry. With a bark, Ponto was up and after him.

Alice stood, and she and Mrs. Clarke quickly hurried after him. Alice didn’t want to miss this part for all the world.

When they reached the entryway, Joseph was staring at the man before him in clear shock. If he recognized Mr. Clarke beneath the disguise, he didn’t say anything. Then again, the coat had been stuffed with more than one pillow and Mr. Clarke had donned a thick white beard which covered nearly all his face.

“Well, hello little boy,” Mr. Clarke said.

Alice was surprised at how much he altered his voice, making it creak like a man far older than himself while also deepening it.

“Hello, sir,” Joseph said.

“Have you been having a good Christmas this year?”

“Yes, sir.” Joseph seemed rooted to the spot, almost scared to find out why Father Christmas was here at all.

“That is good to hear. This is a jolly time of year, and one where we ought to remember the Holy Child.”

Joseph nodded. Opened his mouth. Hesitated. Then licked his lips. “Did . . . did you come to bring me a present?”

Father Christmas laughed. “I did indeed.”

Joseph glanced over his shoulder at Alice, giving her a hopeful smile, and then turned back.

“But it was quite large,” Father Christmas continued. “So, I left it in the nursery.”

Joseph’s eyes grew wide and without another word, he was up the stairs.

“Wait for me, sweetheart,” Alice called after him. Joseph slowed but didn’t stop completely. Ponto took to running between him and Alice and back again.

Alice hurried over to the staircase, saying a quick “Thank you” to Mr. Clarke as she hurried by him. He gave her a wink, then, laughing, he opened the door and stepped outside. His laughter seemed to echo about the entryway even after he’d left.

Alice reached Joseph’s side and took his hand. “What do you say

we go and see your present together?"

Joseph nodded, then hurried forward, tugging on her hand something fearsome.

They reached the nursery door and Joseph pushed it open.

Sitting in the middle of the floor was Isaac, a large ribbon tied in a bow resting atop his head.

"Lord Brooks?" Joseph said, listing his head.

Isaac shook his head. "The weirdest thing just happened to me. A jolly old man showed up at my door, shoved me inside his bag full of presents, then deposited me here and told me to wait with this bow on my head. What do you think it means?"

Joseph's smile returned, more brilliant than Alice had ever seen before. "It means you're going to be my new papa!" Joseph flung himself at Isaac, nearly sending them both to the ground. Ponto didn't help as he bounded over to Isaac, placing his front paws against the man's shoulder.

Alice hurried over, kneeling on the floor as well and taking hold of Isaac's arm so that he didn't actually fall. Joseph continued to hug him as Isaac righted himself.

"Are you sure you want this still?" Alice asked him, not in the least bit worried he'd back down. "Things aren't exactly peaceful here at the cottage."

Isaac wrapped an arm around Joseph. "You are exactly what I want. You all are."

"Even the dog?" Alice asked.

Ponto barked, then licked Isaac's face.

"Down, Ponto," Alice admonished. Ponto sat, but his tail wagged, and his front paws continued to move up and down as though he couldn't quite contain his excitement.

Isaac laughed. "Even the dog. Actually, in some way, especially the dog."

"What?"

Isaac gave her a cocky grin. "He didn't do his job. If he had, I wouldn't be here."

Alice leaned forward and gave him a quick kiss. "I suppose he is rather a wise little puppy."

"Very wise indeed." Isaac kissed her back. Then he turned to Joseph. "Now, my good sir, what do you say we go build a snowman?"

Joseph cried out with joy and leapt onto his feet. Isaac stood as well, taking Alice's hand. Once they were standing, she didn't let go.

She'd had no idea that having a man in her life could be so wonderful. That it could fill a part of her heart she hadn't realized was empty. That instead of feeling like she was trailing behind someone

who rarely thought of her, it could feel like walking beside a dear friend. Her closest friend. The friend who knew her better than anyone, all the different sides of her. And loved all of whom she was without hesitation.

Once bundled, the three of them, with Ponto barking happily alongside them, went out into the snow and celebrated the best Christmas any of them had ever known.

Dear Amelie

Cresthearth Manor, Carlaby
January 7th, 1816

Good news travels fast, and so I am writing this letter to you post haste for I want you to hear it from me first. My dear nephew, Lord Isaac Brooks, is getting married!

I must confess I am a little discouraged at my own follies as a matchmaker—apparently, I didn't have the right match in the beginning at all. More still, I was so worried he would only marry for wealth. But now, not only has he married the wealthiest woman of our acquaintance, but he is clearly, blindingly in love with Lady Nightingale. The more I have come to know the woman, the more I find her an absolute joy. She has even given me leave to call her Alice. She is such a dear.

Every bit as joyful, they have chosen to live here in Carlaby. After their wedding, Isaac will remove himself to Evergreen Cottage. He will be the best father to Alice's little boy, and I pride myself that I am already becoming a favorite aunt. I cannot tell you how happy it makes me to have family nearby once more.

Though—I'm not quite sure how to say this—but it seems Alice has begun freckling something shocking. Her cousin, Mr. Allen, always had so many freckles and Alice said their skin is so much alike. She blames it on all the snowmen she, Isaac, and Joseph, her son, have been building as of late.

As for the last letter you sent me, well, I am shocked to be sure. If I had not recognized your handwriting and known you'd penned the words yourself, I would not have believed them.

I agree that things look quite at a loss. But I urge you not to give up faith. Christmas is a time for miracles, after all. I, for one, am certainly glad we ventured on this matchmaking journey together.

And I must insist you write to me soon. I am sitting on the edge of my seat, waiting to hear how all will resolve.

Your dear friend,
Margarette Fudge



Next in A Christmas Match Series

A Sleigh Ride Kiss by Jen Geigle Johnson

A Christmas Match Series

A Wish for Father Christmas

By Laura Rollins

A Sleigh Ride Kiss

By Jen Geigle Johnson

A Yorkshire Carol

By Jennie Goutet

A Mistletoe Mistmatch

By Sally Britton

A Tangled Wreath

By Laura Beers

*Books in this series may be read in any order.

Author's Note

So, let's talk about Father Christmas. As many of you are probably already aware, Father Christmas was a very different figure during the Regency era than how we see our modern-day Santa Claus.

During the early 1800's, who Father Christmas was—how he dressed, how he acted, and what he enjoyed doing—all varied greatly.

Some people saw him as he is depicted in this book, a jolly old man who walks the streets handing out presents to children. There are drawings from this time period depicting him dressed in a long, often fur-lined, robe, sometimes with a stooped back.

Other people saw him as a raucous old man, who loved drinking and staying up all night dancing and singing with friends.

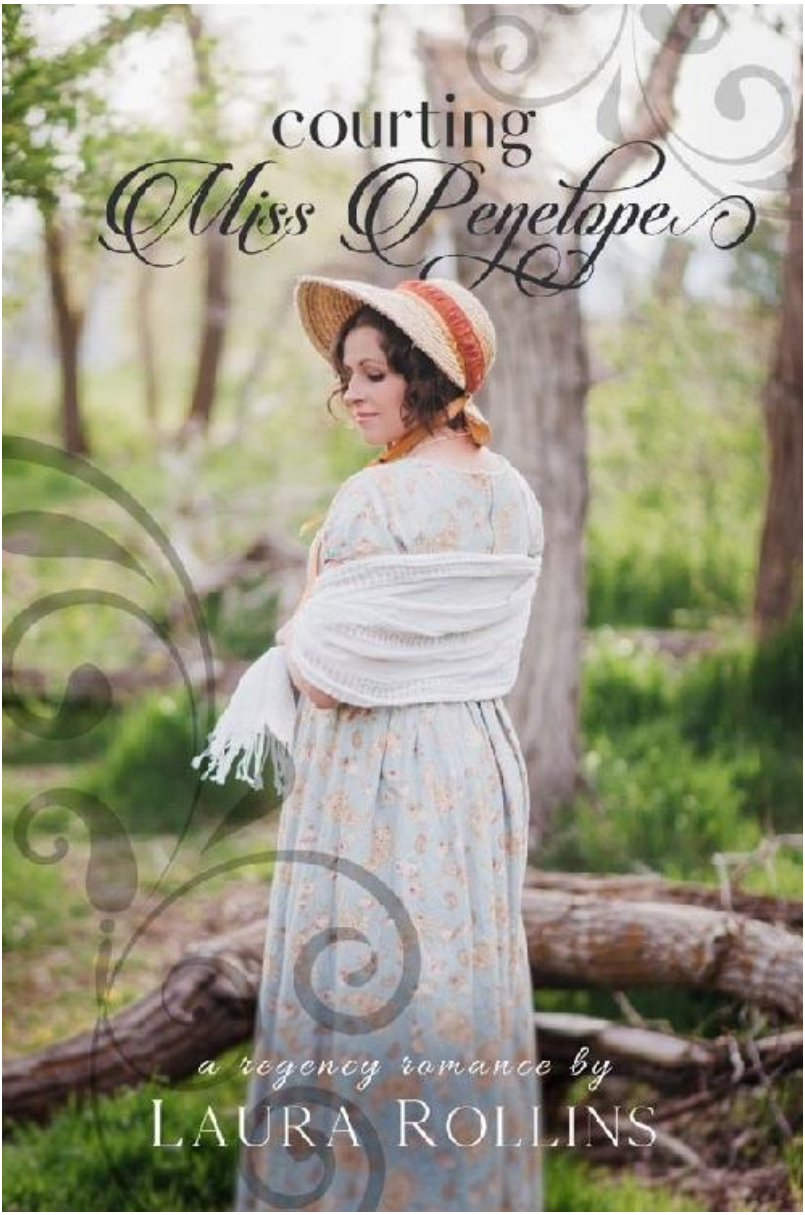
The only true consistency seemed to be that he was an old man who came around every Christmas. Everything else varied depending on family traditions.

During the Regency era, gift-giving did happen during Christmastime, but generally only between family members or the closest of friends. And sometimes not even then. Historians believe that most gifts were given on St. Nicolas Day (December 6th), but there are records of gifts being handed out throughout the Christmas holiday, which didn't end until Epiphany or Twelfth Night. Father Christmas did not have a specific day during the holidays when he showed up to bestow his gifts. He sometimes showed up early in the season and sometimes far later.

For the purposes of this book, I did depict Father Christmas more like how we see him today—a jolly fellow who wishes to bless good little children. I hope you will grant me leniency in this. I felt it made for a better story while not varying too far from how some did see Father Christmas.

I hope you enjoyed this book, and Merry Christmas.

He's been waiting months for her to finally notice him.
Except suddenly, he's not the only one vying for her hand.



Download the short story for free at:
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A Heart in the Balance

A Farewell Kiss

A Well-Kept Promise

A Dickens of a Christmas

The Hope of Christmas Past

The Joy of Christmas Present

The Peace of Christmas Yet to Come

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Lastly, thanks to my Father in Heaven, for giving me a beautiful life and the opportunity to create.

About the Author



Laura Rollins has always loved a heart-melting happily ever after. It didn't matter if the story took place in Regency England, in outer space, beneath the Earth's crust, or in a cobbler's shop, if there was a sweet romance, she would read it.

Life has given her many of her own adventures. Currently she lives in the Rocky Mountains with her best-friend, who is also her husband, and their four beautiful children. She still loves to read books and more books; her favorite types of music are classical, Broadway, and country; she'd rather be hiking the mountains than twiddling her thumbs on the beach; and she's been known to debate with her oldest son over whether Infinity is better categorized as a number or an idea.

For more books, updates,
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